



## DATA WORKSHOP

# Analyzing Everyday Life

### Everyday Class Consciousness



When we are out in public places, we can quickly gather bits of information about other people in the social environment.

These “data” are useful in forming judgments and evaluations about them. Even the smallest presentational details can tell us something about who they are. So, how do you know which social class other people belong to? How do you feel about the fact that others will also be trying to figure out *your* class status? Do the assessments we make about others (and that they make about us) influence our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior? What are the consequences of everyday class consciousness?

In this Data Workshop you will be conducting participant observation research to understand more about how we size up other people in terms of their socioeconomic status. Return to the section in Chapter 2 for a refresher on ethnography/participant observation research methods. First, choose a location to be the field site for your study; it should be a busy public place with a variety of passersby. You will want to be both a participant and an observer in the setting. So, for example, you could pretend to be waiting for someone at the airport, sitting in the food court at the mall, or standing in line at the post office. Next, you'll want to make some discreet but in-depth observations about a small number of people in the setting. One way to take a sample of the population is to select every seventh or tenth person who walks by you. Spend several moments looking closely at him or her. Ask yourself, *What class status do you think this person is?* Don't think too long at this point; just register your guess. Continue this process as you observe another three or four people. Now it is time to write ethnographic field notes, preferably while you're in the field, or as soon as possible afterward. You'll want your notes to include as many details as possible about the people you selected.

Consider the following questions as you analyze your observations. What kinds of things did you observe about others that helped inform your evaluation of their class

status—height, weight, race, age, gender, hairstyle, tattoos, piercings, watch or other jewelry, or makeup? Perhaps their style of dress, the colors, fabrics, or logos on a T-shirt, hat, purse, sunglasses, or shoes caught your attention. Did you notice anything else, such as the person's posture, voice, or mannerisms? If you observed someone on the street, did you see the car he or she was driving? What was its make, year, and condition? Did you notice other status clues in any accessories the person had—a laptop or smartphone, a baby stroller or shopping bags? How did the setting itself (mall, post office, airport) influence your assumptions about their social class standing?

*There are two options for completing this Data Workshop:*

**PREP-PAIR-SHARE** Conduct your participant observation research according to the instructions. Prepare some ethnographic field notes that you can refer to in class. Get together with one or more of your fellow students and share your experiences. Note similarities and differences in the criteria used by each group member to determine the social class of the people they observed.

**DO-IT-YOURSELF** Conduct your research in a public place and write a three- to four-page essay describing your observations of four to five people from the field site. Answer the questions in the preceding section, and make specific reference to your field notes as the data to support your analysis (remember to attach the field notes to your paper). What are the consequences of everyday class consciousness? How does it affect your perceptions, attitudes, and behavior?

## Socioeconomic Status and Life Chances

Belonging to a certain social class brings such profound consequences that it's possible to make general predictions about a person's life chances in regard to education, work, crime, family, and health just by knowing his or her SES. The following discussion may help you appreciate the respective privileges and hardships associated with different levels of the social hierarchy.

### Family

Sociologists know that people are likely to marry or have long-term relationships with persons whose social and cultural backgrounds are similar to their own—not because they are