

What Is Classism

Classism is differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.

That includes:

- individual attitudes and behaviors;
- systems of policies and practices that are set up to benefit the upper classes at the expense of the lower classes, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality;
- the rationale that supports these systems and this unequal valuing; and
- the culture that perpetuates them.

Classism is held in place by a system of beliefs and cultural attitudes that ranks people according to economic status, family lineage, job status, level of education, and other divisions.

Middle-class and owning- or ruling-class people (dominant group members) are seen as smarter and more articulate than working-class and poor people (subordinated groups). In this way, dominant group members (middle-class and wealthy people) define for everyone else what is “normal” or “acceptable” in the class hierarchy.

People who are poor/working class sometimes internalize the dominant society's beliefs and attitudes toward them, and play them out against themselves and others of their class. Internalized classism is the acceptance and justification of classism by working class and poor people. Examples include: feelings of inferiority to higher-class people; disdain or shame about traditional patterns of class in one's family and a denial of heritage; feelings of superiority to people lower on the class spectrum than oneself; hostility and blame towards other working-class or poor people; and beliefs that classist institutions are fair.

People who are middle-class and wealthy sometimes internalize the dominant society's beliefs and attitudes toward them, and play them out against others. Internalized superiority is the acceptance and justification of class privilege by middle-class and wealthy people. Class privilege include the many tangible or intangible unearned advantages of “higher” class status, such as personal contacts with employers, “legacy admissions” to higher education, inherited money, good childhood health care, quality education, speaking with the same dialect and accent as people with institutional power, and having knowledge of how the systems of power operate.

A person from the more privileged classes can be a class ally—a person whose attitudes and behaviors are anti-classist, who is committed to increasing his or her own understanding of the issues related to classism, and is actively working towards eliminating classism on many levels.

Class Definitions

Class – relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, status and/or power.

Classism – differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic assignment of worth based on social class; policies and practices set up to benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of the less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality and causing basic human needs to go unmet; the rationale and the culture which perpetuates these systems and this unequal valuing.

Class Privilege – Tangible or intangible unearned advantages of higher-class status, such as personal contacts with employers, good childhood health care, inherited money, speaking with the same dialect/accents as people with institutional power.

Class Ally – A person from the more privileged classes whose attitudes and behaviors are anti-classist, who is committed to increasing his or her own understanding of this issue related to classism, and is actively working towards eliminating classism on many levels.

Individual Classism – This term refers to classism on a personal or individual level, either in behavior or attitudes, either conscious and intentional, or unconscious and unintentional.

Institutional Classism – This term refers to the ways in which intentional and unintentional classism is manifest in the various institutions of our society.

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