Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main
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My counterpart determines my behavior
A social-psychological study shows that while the social class in which a person is raised influences behavior, the communication situation is even more important

FRANKFURT. Are people with more money and education dominating and less warm? A social-psychological study at Goethe University scrutinizes stereotypes.

How is our behavior influenced by our social class? Sociology has long concerned itself with this question. Whether individuals grow up in a working-class environment or in an academic household, they take on behaviors that are typical for their class – so goes the hypothesis. The Frankfurt social-psychologist Dr. Anna Lisa Aydin has found new evidence to support this hypothesis. Her study, which she carried out jointly with researchers from Zurich, Hagen, Idaho and Tel Aviv, and which has been published in the scientific journal Social Psychological and Personality Science also shows, however, that people don’t just rigidly exhibit class-specific behavior, but respond flexibly to counterparts from other social classes.

A large portion of the research on the influence of social class stems from the ideas of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He describes how the environment in which we grow up inscribes itself deeply into our identity. Social-psychological authors argue that people from lower social classes have access to fewer resources and can only influence their environment to a limited degree. They therefore rely more on mutual assistance, making solidarity an important value. People identify with this value and behave cooperatively as a result. People from upper social classes, on the other hand, have access to more resources, can choose from among several alternatives, and are less dependent on mutual assistance. This results in individualistic conceptions of the self where shaping the environment according to one’s own preferences is paramount. These different modes of behavior therefore constitute adaptations to corresponding social environments.

This theory was supported in part by the current study. Overall, more than 2,000 people in Germany were surveyed. For respondents who considered themselves to be members of a lower class, warm and cooperative interaction with other people in their social class was more important than for those who considered themselves members of a higher social class. In addition, those who earned more and were better educated set more value on demonstrating competence and being assertive in their interactions with others than those in the group with lower earnings and less education.

The authors feared that these differences in behavior could lead to a further increase in social inequality in Germany. Individuals who exhibit assertiveness have better chances for social advancement. However, the observed differences in behavior were relatively small. The influence of the social class of the individual’s counterpart had a significantly greater impact. How do people behave when interacting with someone from a lower or higher social group? The majority of those surveyed described social difference in Germany as unjustified or not very justified. As a result, they found it important to behave warmly and cooperatively toward people with less money and education. Conversely, they set value on appearing competent and assertive toward people with more money and education.
These findings are particularly relevant in view of the fact that social inequality is increasing in Germany and other parts of the world, although most people perceive this as unjustified. While research based on sociological theories can explain how this inequality can be exacerbated by conditioning within different social classes, the current study offers an optimistic perspective: in communication situations between people of different classes where class differences are perceived as illegitimate, solidarity with the poor and assertiveness toward the rich are exhibited.

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Goethe University is a research-oriented university in the European financial centre Frankfurt. The university was founded in 1914 through private funding, primarily from Jewish sponsors, and has since produced pioneering achievements in the areas of social sciences, sociology and economics, medicine, quantum physics, brain research, and labour law. It gained a unique level of autonomy on 1 January 2008 by returning to its historic roots as a “foundation university”. Today, it is among the top ten in external funding and among the top three largest universities in Germany, with three clusters of excellence in medicine, life sciences and the humanities. Together with the Technical University of Darmstadt and the University of Mainz, it acts as a partner of the inter-state strategic Rhine-Main University Alliance.

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