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Diversity in lay perceptions of social class among Finnish youth

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Abstract

This study explores young Finnish people's lay perceptions of social class with a focus on the class terms used to form hierarchies based on their everyday understanding. Our approach is based on cultural class research, which focuses on diversity and subtle nuances of class. The participants were 519 young people ages 15 to 25. The data were collected using the word association method and analyzed by quantitative and qualitative content analyses. While 254 participants perceived Finland as having social classes, their perceptions differed from each other. Half of them formed class hierarchies with more explicit logic, and the other half used more implicit ways of forming hierarchies with diverse class terms based on themes of economy, employment, power, majority/minority, and education. Our findings show ample diversity in both the vertical and horizontal perceptions of social class among young lay people.

Keywords: class hierarchy, diversity, lay perceptions, social class, word association method

Introduction

Studying social class is challenging because class-related hierarchies and inequality cover many different contents and perspectives that can be expressed explicitly and implicitly. Savage (2000) suggested that instead of traditional class theorizing, researchers should develop more open ways of studying the various means by which social class may appear in ordinary people's everyday lives. Since the 2000s, a new approach to social class has spread. This new cultural perspective of class, referred to primarily as "cultural analysis of class" (Reay, 2006, pp. 289–290) or "culturalist class analysis" (Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 196), emerged in the aftermath of the individualistic shift in society (see, e.g., Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Individualization theorists (e.g., Beck, 1992) have claimed that in postmodern societies characterized by individualism, grand narratives—like social class—have lost their relevance in shaping people's lives. Instead of collective identities, people's identities and life courses are understood as a matter of individual choices. In this new social context, the former social class analysis has been left shorthanded in the face of new forms of social inequalities produced, for example, by labor market changes and increases in long-term employment (Crompton & Scott, 2000, p. 5; Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 185). Therefore, proponents of cultural class research have argued that social classes needed to be studied more diversely than in traditional class analysis (e.g., Crompton, 2008, pp. 2–5).

The critique of traditional class analysis posed by cultural class research mainly focuses on two traditions. On the one hand, it criticizes Marxist and Weberian traditions that define social classes as groups

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structured on the basis of economic relationships and therefore place too much emphasis on the importance of economically determined classes while downplaying other perspectives (Crompton, 2008, p. 47). On the other hand, it questions the narrowness of another well-established tradition (e.g., Goldthorpe & Lockwood, 1963) that views classes as objective positions based on the classification of occupation and employment relations (Crompton & Scott, 2000, pp. 2–6) and by doing so distances itself from "income-based definitions or measures of class, preferring to conceptualize class in the terms of people's location within employment relationships" (Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 185). Despite this criticism, economic/income-based factors are not completely rejected or ignored in all approaches to cultural class research. Whereas cultural analysis of class focuses on "developing conceptualizations that move beyond the economic perspective" (Reay, 2006, p. 289), culturalist class analysis strongly emphasizes the need to include economic factors in class analysis, not "in a narrow sense but as a set of practices that are imbued with cultural meanings and experiences" (Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 196). In the context of our study, we include economical perspectives in our class analysis by acknowledging the economy as a cultural phenomenon with ideological foundations (see Anderson, 2001) exemplified by neoliberal ethos in Finnish society.

While cultural class research has established itself alongside the more traditional class research, the notion of class has also shifted from an objective one based on precise professional and economic positions (Goldthorpe, 1996) to a more subjective one based on individual perceptions of how individuals or groups are positioned in the social order of precedence in a particular culture (Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). The cultural perspective on class is flexible because perceptions of what social classes are and what kinds of characteristics they are based on vary with time and place (Kahma, 2011). Indeed, cultural class research has rejected the idea of social class as clearly distinct class groups and identities and has instead sought to focus more broadly on various individualized hierarchical differentiations that produce inequality (Bottero, 2004).

In cultural class research, the interest in class is focused on class processes and practices with the aim of developing ways of conceptualizing social class to show how the processes of inequality are routinely produced in social situations through both economic and cultural practices (Bottero, 2004; Devine & Savage, 2000). Savage (2000) and Bottero (2004) emphasized that class processes work in society, even if people do not explicitly recognize these processes or identify themselves with distinct class-based groups. The renewal of hierarchies is carried out daily by everyone through mundane routine activities, and those everyday routines are enough to reproduce social inequalities. According to cultural class theory, it is more useful to view class cultures as modes of differentiation than as collective types of class identification because class processes take place through individualized distinctions and not through unambiguous social groupings. Hence, individualization does not mean the death of the social class but changes to its operation. It no longer works through collective class identifications but through individualized hierarchical processes of separation (Bottero, 2004). According to Bottero (2004), this has made class processes more implicit and less visible, but the effects of class on people have remained pervasive.

In the 21st century, social class research on young people in Finland has been increasingly carried out from the cultural approach of social class and, in particular, from the perspective of subjective class experiences. This body of research has been characterized by the focus on social class experiences intertwined with intersectionality, especially with gender (Tolonen, 2008). For instance, Käyhkö (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) studied young working-class women's experiences in the academic world and found that they often felt like they were living in two distinct worlds consisting of the different expectations and cultural codes of working-class and academic culture. This resulted in feelings of inadequacy as both an academic and a working-class woman. Tolonen and Aapola-Kari (2022), in turn, examined the relationship between young people's educational choices and their class experiences and found that Finnish young people made gendered and classed educational choices that were intertwined with social relations, racialization, and locality. For example, young people with a high cultural capital background (i.e., highly educated parents) valued themselves higher in the education market. In addition, Peltola (2021) studied lower secondary school pupils' perspectives of school segregation and school selection in everyday life at school. Peltola

found that the social class and racialized distinctions pupils constructed coincided with schools' selective admissions policies and grouping practices, which intersected with social class and racialization. Finally, Oittinen et al. (2022) found that lower secondary school pupils' life domains at home, school, and leisure were interconnected in ways that produced social distinctions, hierarchies, and divisions between pupils.

Our study examines how young people born and raised in Finland between 1990 and 2000 perceive social classes and how these perceptions structure class hierarchy. Our study is guided by the following research questions: What kind of class terms do young people use when naming social classes, and what kind of class hierarchies do they build based on their everyday knowledge? Are class terms and the hierarchies the terms build coherent, and if not, what kinds of diversity do they hold? Our study has methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions. Methodologically, we contribute to the cultural class research examining class diversity by creating a participant-driven methodological design to gather information on cultural, individualized, and implicit contents of social class. Empirically, our study contributes to understanding of the diversity of young people's lay perceptions of social class. The study brings new information about how young people make sense of social class from their perspectives (i.e., lay perceptions), how they conceptualize social classes in their own words, and how their perceptions and conceptualizations reflect cultural factors. Hence, young people's lay perceptions of social class indicate not only their individual perceptions but also the social and cultural contexts in which they live. Theoretically, our aim is to examine which culturally bound factors serve as a basis for young people to construct social classes.

In this article, we build our theoretical framework on cultural class research in the sense that we see young people's lay perceptions of social class formed in those cultural circumstances in which they live. We adopt the subjective perspective of class (see Kahma, 2011), which understands social class as a culturally specific, implicit, diverse, and multi-faceted concept. Class-related ways of understanding are socially constructed cultural perceptions that can vary between different groups of people within a society or culture. In addition, we understand social classes as class categories and a class category as a group of people placed in a certain category according to internal similarities and external differences (Harrits & Pedersen, 2018).

Background

Challenge of Cultural Diversity for Lay Perceptions of Social Class

The way cultural class research perceives class as hierarchical, individualized, and implicit has brought new challenges to the study of class categories. Some scholars have stated that it is not meaningful to study class categories in the context of cultural class research because attempts to approach class categories have tended to slip into traditional ways of understanding social class as categorical, explicit, and collective (e.g., Bottero, 2004). Other scholars have noted that even though class identification has weakened, the importance of social class as a producer of social inequality has held up (e.g., Harrits & Pedersen, 2018; Irwin, 2015, 2018). Even though people may not use traditional class-terminology (e.g., working class, middle class, upper class) when talking about social class, they have been found to conceptualize class in diverse and detailed ways. Their perceptions of different class positions tend to be situational, pragmatic, and practical accounts of the material contexts (e.g., income, employment, and education) in which people live their lives (Irwin, 2015).

Payne and Grew (2005) emphasized that when studying the class perceptions of laypeople, researchers must be aware that they have a different frame of reference for social class than scholars. They criticized a study conducted by Savage et al. (2001) in which the researchers conceptualized the absence of traditional class terminology (e.g., working class, middle class, upper class) in participants' accounts as "classlessness." According to Payne and Grew (2005), the absence of traditional class terminology does not mean that social class was not relevant to the participants but that they simply no longer used such terminology

when talking about their class perceptions. In other words, laypeople's perceptions of social class have become more diverse, and therefore, it no longer makes sense to use traditional class terminology (e.g., working class and middle class) as sole analytical tools. Payne and Grew (2005; see also Irwin, 2015) also emphasized that because social class is a complex concept that can be understood in diverse ways, people may find it challenging to answer research questions related to it. Whereas some people may still use traditional class terminology when reflecting on social class, others may use more specific terms and descriptions of social inequality, for example, related to education, lifestyle, profession, and work-related tasks (Payne & Grew, 2005). According to Payne and Grew (2005), this should not be interpreted as a rejection of class but rather as people's efforts to create a better understanding of how class functions in everyday life and society. Hence, people may talk about social class even if they do not mention the word "class" at all.

In the Scandinavian context, Harrits and Pedersen (2018) drew on the British cultural approach to class to explore whether people still used class terms to describe social relationships and their own position in them and how they understood social classes in their everyday lives (see also Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2015). Their results showed that people continued to use traditional class terms in a hierarchical sense. In addition, social class was also conceptualized in a more diverse way, with hierarchies based on, for instance, education and other cultural resources as well as lifestyles. The results provided support for the view that social class can also be studied separately from traditional class identifications and concepts or class struggles. In lay perceptions, social classes and hierarchies have become more nuanced and multidimensional, clustering several intertwined or competing dimensions.

Due to diverse ways of understanding and talking about social class, interpreting laypeople's perceptions of social class may be challenging for researchers. What can be interpreted as accounts of class versus inequality at a more general level? Payne and Grew (2005) offered two solutions to this dilemma. One is to keep the stricter, structural definition of class based on labor market status. In that case, indirect notions of social class could not be interpreted as accounts of social class. Another solution, which is often used in cultural class research, is to consider anything that can be interpreted as a description of hierarchy, social advantage, and norms of differentiation as indirect descriptions of social class (Payne & Grew, 2005).

Therefore, it is characteristic of cultural class research to understand social class and hierarchies as culturally bound, diverse, and nuanced expressions of inequality. When examining laypeople's perceptions of social class and hierarchies, a researcher drawing on cultural class research needs to accept two starting points: first, the individualistic and subjective perspective on class and second, the notion of class as implicit, complex, controversial, and embedded in the everyday mundane practices of culture (Bottero, 2004; Irwin, 2015, 2018; Savage, 2000). Thus, researchers must be open to interpreting social class more broadly than traditional class terminology and must pay attention to more diverse expressions of social class. In this study, we adopt the aforementioned premises typical of cultural class research.

Context of the Study

Currently, the first generation to have lived its entire childhood and youth in the time after the 1990s recession, which was characterized by neoliberal ethos and emphasis on individualism, is in early adulthood in Finland. Individual neoliberalism values efficiency, innovation, competitiveness, and growth and regards meeting these values as a responsibility of individuals to succeed in life in general. In the mid-1990s, this individualistic entrepreneurial approach was cherished to the extent that it was included in the general education curricula, and children began to be educated on internal and external entrepreneurship with the aim of supporting the development of initiative, risk-taking, self-help, and strong performance motivation (Komulainen et al., 2010; Opetusministeriö, 2004, 2009).

While the focus of neoliberal ethos on individualism emphasizing everyone's own responsibility for their success wiped away class at the level of public discourse, societal development in Finland in the 2000s changed the Finnish class order and its perception (Ojajärvi et al., 2016). In Finland, this increased researchers' interest in social classes and their socio-economic and cultural contents (e.g., Erola, 2010;

Hiidenheimo et al., 2009; Järvinen & Kolbe, 2007, 2019; Kantola & Kuusela, 2019; Kolbe, 2014; Koskinen-Koivisto, 2014; Sundström & Söderling, 2009). The background of the change can be traced to the 1990s recession and Finland's membership in the EU, which transformed Finnish society; the position of labor in relation to the power of capital weakened, social polarization increased, and market thinking gained increasing support and spread not only to the economy but other spheres of life as well. This social upheaval was also driven by the global economy and labor market, especially neoliberal ethos. Strongly based on individualism, this ideological and cultural change created new ways of speech, beliefs, practices, and institutions based on power relations, which naturalized the perception of the new socio-economic organization of society (Erola, 2000; Julkunen, 2001; Komulainen et al., 2010; Miller & Rose, 2010; Ojajärvi et al., 2016; Ojajärvi & Steinby, 2008; Rose, 1999).

One of the most central phenomena of individualism in Finnish society has been that social contradictions are seen as matters of individual choice rather than matters to be solved at the societal level (Siltala, 1996; 2004). In this mode of thinking, class relations are seen as internal conflicts of individuals as well as competitive positions between individuals. Individualistic discourses about inner heroism (everyone is the architect of their own fortune) contributed to the attenuation of class consciousness and the silencing of social discourse on social classes. Thus, individualism, fueled by neoliberal ethos, turned social inequality into an individual-level problem; by obscuring class as a source of social stratification, a new kind of class struggle was created, in which the cause of inferiority was returned to the individual (Julkunen, 2001; Ojajärvi et al., 2016; Siltala, 1996, 2004).

Method

This article is based on qualitative data collected by the first author via an online questionnaire at educational institutions in the Kuopio region (Eastern Finland) in autumn 2015. The youngest participants were ninth graders at comprehensive school, and the oldest were students at vocational school or in higher education. The theme of the questionnaire was youth and social class. The material of this article is based on a question in which the respondents were asked to list in their own words all social classes they thought existed in Finland and put these social classes into a hierarchical order.[1] The data were collected using the word association method, which has previously been used in the study of lay perceptions and commonsense knowledge. The method can be used to map participants' perceptions of the phenomenon under study (Sakki et al., 2014). In the word association method, the researcher gives a stimulating word (e.g., social class) and asks participants to write down words or phrases in the order in which they come to mind (Sakki et al., 2014). The advantage of the method is that it allows for the emergence of spontaneous ideas and responses (Moloney et al., 2005). Sakki et al. (2014) noted that the participants found the method pleasant and motivating, even when the focus was on abstract and complex phenomena.

Because the study focuses on finding out how and through which terms young people perceive social class from their everyday knowledge, the word association method was regarded as suitable for data collection. Unlike the traditional word association method, the present study was not interested in which terms came first to the minds of the participants. Instead, we explored through which spontaneous terms and themes young people perceived social classes and what kind of class hierarchy these terms built. Therefore, the participants were asked to put the class terms in hierarchical order. According to the cultural class research approach (see Payne & Grew, 2005), the class terms used by young people draw from the values, beliefs, practices, and ways of speech that prevail in our society. Thus, in the case of neoliberal ethos, young people's everyday knowledge of social classes is built on interaction with the cultural ethos characteristic of the society.

The assumption of the hierarchical nature of social classes was incorporated into the question. Since social classes conceptually include hierarchy and social stratification, the creation of a hierarchical setting in the question was not considered problematic. Although the organization of classes into a hierarchy was

defined in the question, the young people named social classes in their own words and placed them in a hierarchy according to their own perceptions, which allowed them ample freedom of choice to approach social class from their own perspective and based on their own perceptions. In addition, the open form of the question allowed the participants to make social class hierarchies based on their own everyday thinking. Thus, class terms and hierarchies were collected from an emic perspective (i.e., in verbal terms that are understood and acknowledged by the participants in their everyday lives; see Headland et al., 1990).

In the 21st century, ample studies have been conducted in cultural class research on class consciousness and class identity (e.g., Devine et al., 2004; Käyhkö, 2015; Savage et al., 2010; Silva, 2013, 2016; Skeggs, 2004). Some studies on lay perceptions of social class in the context of cultural class research have also utilized different forms of qualitative interviews, such as semi-structured interviews (e.g., Irwin, 2015, 2018) and focus group discussions (e.g., Harrits & Pedersen, 2018). However, Payne and Grew (2005) noted a possible challenge to using interviews when studying social class; interviewees may express their views about social class in a seemingly confused way because they are asked to contemplate an utterly multi-faceted concept on short notice. This may result in researchers' notions of class ambivalence or even classlessness. In addition, data collected through interviews or written narratives tend to emphasize rational thinking with the need to explain causality, reasoning, and consequences. We believe that our methodological design, in which participants placed words expressing social class into hierarchical order, minimized the problems of ambiguity indicated by Payne and Grew (2005) both on behalf of participants and researchers. We hope that by asking participants to write down the social classes in a hierarchical order that reflected their own perceptions, researchers' influence on participants' reasoning was diminished. Although the absence of the context of the sentence is an obvious shortcoming in our word associations approach, it benefits strongly from associativity. The word association method emphasizes spontaneous and associative thinking, which may bring forth more implicit class perceptions. We believe that the associative orientation of this methodological approach makes it easier for young people to reflect on social class and form class hierarchies.

The participants were 519 young people ages 15 to 25 (born in the 1990s–2000s) at the time of response, with 70% women and 30% men. The biggest age group represented in the data was respondents ages 15 to 16 (36.6%), and the biggest group by educational background was comprehensive school pupils (27.8%). In general, more respondents were in the lower half of the age bracket than the upper half. Nearly two-thirds (61.3%) of the respondents were ages 15 to 19, whereas one-third (38.7%) were ages 20 to 25. In terms of the level of education, the respondents were upper secondary school students (17.1%), vocational school students (18.7%), and students pursuing their studies at universities (17.5%) or universities of applied sciences (18.9%).

Of the 519 total respondents, 100 (19.3%) left the question unanswered, 23 (4.4%) replied that they did not know which social classes existed in Finland, and 142 (27.4%) said that there are no social classes in Finland. Thus, 254 (49.1%) agreed that there are classes in Finland. They named social classes and placed them into hierarchical order according to status. This article focuses on these 254 responses.

The analysis was divided into three analytical phases. The first focused on quantitative content analysis and the second and third on data-driven qualitative content analysis. In the quantitative content analysis, the content of the data is presented numerically. In practice, this means calculating the frequency of words related to the research topic in the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). In this study, quantitative content analysis meant counting the different words expressing social classes mentioned by young people. In qualitative content analysis, an overall understanding of the data is formed through classification. The analysis units of content analysis can be both individual words and broader linguistic expressions (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2014). In this study, the content analysis focused on individual words through which young people named social classes. Based on the meanings of the words, we formed class categories that clustered young people's social class perceptions. A qualitative content analysis of individual words was challenging due to the lack of a sentence connection that specifies the meaning of a word. However, in our study, the hierarchical order made it possible to conclude what kind of class position the words listed by young peo-

ple constructed. Finally, we used qualitative content analysis to examine and compare the class categories positioned at the top, middle, and bottom of the class hierarchies.

The class terms named by young people reflect their ways of perceiving social classes, and the hierarchies formed by the class terms reflect their perceptions of the relationships between class positions. Therefore, in this paper, we use class category as an analytical tool when referring to the class terms named by young people. When using the concepts of highest, middle, and lowest level classes or class terms at the top, middle, and bottom of the class hierarchy, we are not referring to the traditional class terminology of **upper class, middle class, and working class** but to the placement of the class terms in the hierarchy designated by the participants. Therefore, to the highest class, we collected the class term each participant mentioned first on their class hierarchy list, and to the lowest class, we collected the class term each participant mentioned last on their list. For the middle class, we collected the class term each participant mentioned in the middle of their class hierarchy list. This symmetrical division we made was based on the hierarchies the participants constructed themselves (see Note 1).

Results

We present the results of this study in three stages. Through a step-by-step presentation of the results, we aim to illustrate the research process as a whole and indicate how the results of the previous stage guided the next stage of analysis. For clarity, we also include a description of the methodological choices.

Stage 1: Class Hierarchies Based on One or Two Factors

The first stage of the analysis was inductive. The first author classified the respondent-specific class hierarchies using the data analysis tool Atlas.ti. By respondent-specific class hierarchy, we mean the list of social classes given by one respondent (i.e., all social classes listed by that individual in hierarchical order from the highest to the lowest class). Young people constructed class hierarchies in three different ways. First, they listed class hierarchies based on one factor, such as income level, traditional class terminology, position of power, or education, as exemplified by the categories *rich – middle income – poor* (income level), *upper class – upper middle class – middle class – working class* (traditional class terminology), *president – employers – workers* (position of power), or *higher education graduates – students – vocational education – educated – uneducated* (education).

Secondly, young people built class hierarchies, all of which combined two factors, namely income level with some other factor: traditional class terminology, position of power, or reliance on social benefits. Examples of such hierarchies were *wealthy – upper middle class – middle class – lower middle class – underprivileged* (income level and traditional class terminology), *millionaires – politicians – high income – middle income – low income* (income level and position of power), or *high income – middle income – poor – on the dole* (income level and social security status).

Thirdly, respondents built class hierarchies based on people's characteristics (one factor). Thus, they did not list groups of people but rather characteristics that produce divisions between people, such as *gender – disability – age – income level*. These weren't hierarchies per se, but we kept them in our analysis because they added information about the diversity of hierarchies. Table 1 presents in more detail all the bases and proportions of the classifications that we obtained as a result during the first phase of the analysis.

Table 1 *Criteria for Classifying Class Hierarchies Given by Young People*

Factor	n	%
1. One Factor		
Income level	57	22.4
Traditional class terminology	22	8.7
Position of power	6	2.4
Education	4	1.6
2. Two Factors (incl. income)		
Traditional class terminology + income level	24	9.4
Position of power + income level	6	2.4
Social security dependence + income level	4	1.6
3. Characteristics	6	2.4
Sub-Total	129	50.8
Others	125	49.2
Total	***254***	***100***

Altogether, 129 young people produced these kinds of logically internally congruent class hierarchies based on one or two factors. In addition, at this stage of our analysis, the content class "others" (n = 125) was formed. It consisted of hierarchies that did not follow one or two internally congruent logics described above but were based on multiple and diverse factors. This content class was the focus of the second and third stages of analysis.

Before that, we provide some descriptive information[2] about the respondents' backgrounds in relation to their perceptions of class. As Table 2 shows, respondents who estimated their own and their families' current livelihood as poor tended to perceive Finland as having social classes. Those respondents who estimated their own and their families' current livelihood as moderate or good tended to perceive Finland as not having social classes. Hence, it seemed that less privileged respondents were more often inclined to see Finland as a classed society. However, respondents' current educational position was an even more relevant factor: the higher the educational position was, the more often respondents perceived the existence of classes. Young people's current educational position was also relevant in terms of what kind of class hierarchies they formed. University students were likely to form diverse hierarchies, while respondents from universities of applied sciences formed hierarchies based on one or two factors. Additionally, respondents who viewed their family's livelihood as poor tended to perceive hierarchies based on one or two factors. In terms of age, older respondents were more likely to perceive of social classes in Finland than younger ones. The association with parents' education level was not so clear. However, it seemed that if parents had a higher education degree, respondents were more likely to perceive of Finland as having social classes. Finally, while female respondents were likely to perceive the existence of social classes, male respondents tended to not perceive the existence of classes, answered that they did not know, or did not answer the question at all.

Table 2 *Class Perceptions of Young People Presented via Demographics by Row Percentages*

(n)	No answer or do not know %	There are no social classes in Finland, %	There are social classes, hierarchy based on 1 or 2 factors, %	There are social classes, diverse hierarchy, %
Gender				
Male (154)	39.0	29.9	14.3	16.9
Female (359)	16.7	26.5	29.5	27.3
Age				
15–16 (190)	40.5	32.1	14.2	13.2
17–19 (128)	26.6	35.2	15.6	22.7
20–22 (103)	8.7	17.5	37.9	35.9
23–25 (98)	3.1	18.4	43.9	34.7
Current educational position				
Comprehensive school (141)	49.6	29.8	11.3	9.2
Upper secondary school (87)	10.3	39.1	24.1	26.4
Vocational school (95)	31.6	33.7	15.8	18.9
University of applied sciences (96)	4.2	15.6	46.9	33.3
University (89)	6.7	19.1	33.7	40.4
Educational level of the mother				
Comprehensive school diploma* (26)	15.4	19.2	26.9	38.5
Upper secondary school or matriculation examination (57)	33.3	29.8	31.6	5.3
Vocational school diploma (127)	24.4	28.3	25.2	22.0
Bachelor's degree (108)	13.0	24.1	25.0	38.0
Master's degree or higher (108)	26.1	8.7	13.0	52.2
Educational level of the father				
Comprehensive school diploma* (46)	26.1	23.9	30.4	19.6
Upper secondary school or matriculation examination (23)	21.7	21.7	39.1	17.4
Vocational school diploma (181)	27.1	26.5	24.3	22.1
Bachelor's degree (79)	11.4	30.4	25.3	32.9
Master's degree or higher (79)	10.1	21.5	31.6	36.7
Estimate of the family's livelihood when under 17 years old				
Poor or very poor (55)	20.0	18.2	38.2	23.6
Moderate (257)	23.3	30.4	23.3	23.0
Good or very good (207)	25.1	26.1	23.2	25.6
Estimate of the personal current livelihood				
Poor or very poor (140)	17.1	25.0	28.6	29.3
Moderate (269)	24.5	27.1	24.5	23.8
Good or very good (110)	30.0	30.9	20.9	18.2

*Also, public or civic school or middle or grammar school

Stage 2: Diverse Class Hierarchies

At the end of the first phase of the analysis, we noticed that in the class hierarchies of 125 respondents was a content class coded as "others," in which the construction of the hierarchy was more diverse than in the hierarchies based on one or two factors. We named these hierarchies "diverse" and examined them under closer scrutiny. They included overlapping or seemingly incompatible social class terms, such as the following: *rich Finns – above-average income – average income – poor – unemployed – sexual minorities and people with disabilities – immigrants*. In this example, the class hierarchy formed interlaced citizenship, income level, employment position, and majority/minority position, where the combination of being Finnish and rich brought the highest social class position and immigration the lowest. We first attempted to encode these class hierarchies inductively using Atlas.ti. However, we found that this kind of coding based on a specific attribute did not work, and the multiple class hierarchies had to be analyzed in another way. At this point, our analysis became more deductive.

Because the ways of forming hierarchies were utterly diverse, our attention was drawn to the extremes and centers of the hierarchies, where we noticed recurring patterns. Because class research is ultimately about researching inequality, we focused on analyzing three levels of diverse class hierarchies: the class terms mentioned at the top, middle, and bottom of the hierarchy. We felt this methodological choice was justified because the class terms placed at those three levels in the hierarchy reflected young people's conceptions and values related to groups of people they positioned among the highest, middle, and lowest level in Finnish society.

In the diverse class hierarchies, the class terms expressing the highest social class emphasized economic well-being and power, but themes of employment, education, and nationality also emerged. We identified five class categories expressing the social class at the top of the hierarchy: economically well-off people (n = 65), employed people (n = 10), people in a position of power (n = 30), Finns (n = 6), and highly educated people (n = 8). The class terms mentioned at the middle of the hierarchy largely expressed similar themes, but the diversity was greater than in the highest class. We formed a total of six class categories based on the class terms in the middle: people in different economic positions (n = 48), people in different employment positions (n = 56), middle class people (n = 23), people in margins of society (n = 11), educated people (n = 5), and ordinary people (n = 8). Finally, the following five class categories were formed based on the class terms expressing the social class at the bottom of the hierarchy: economically disadvantaged people (n = 38), non-working people (n = 42), marginalized people (n = 13), people from outside Finland (n = 13), and people in minorities (n = 9). Thus, not having an active working life and being economically inferior were emphasized as the most central aspects of the lowest social class. In addition, marginalized people, minorities, and those who came to Finland from elsewhere (i.e., refugees and immigrants) were positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy. To increase the transparency of our analysis, we compiled the highest, middle, and lowest social class terms mentioned by young people (which served as the basis for the classification and formation of class categories) in Table 3.

Table 3 *Young People's Class Terms Expressing Social Classes at the Highest, Middle and Lowest Level of the Class Hierarchy*

THE HIGHEST CLASS (n = 119)				
Economically well-off people (n = 65)	**Employed people (*n* = 10)**	**People in a position of power (*n* = 30)**	**Finns (*n* = 6)**	**Highly-educated people (*n* = 8)**
-Prosperous (2) - Well-paid (5) -Highest paid (2) -High-paid "burghers" -High paid (2) -Millionaires (2) -Owning -Bourgeois (7) -Bourgeois/rich -Well above average income -Rich (29) -Rich and prosperous -Rich (e.g., doctors) -Rich who don't have to work -Rich (owners) -High-income earners -Born rich -Truly rich families -Wealthier -Wealthy (2) -Upper-class "rich" -Stinking rich	-Blue-collar workers -Straights at work -Those who are interested in working -Self-sufficient and active (civil society) -Employed -Working people (3) -Employee -Those who work	-Experts -Business speculators, managers, the rich -Decision makers in Parliament -Parliament -Elite (6) -Elite/upper class -Society -High-income politicians, etc. -High-income large entrepreneurs and politicians -Managers (2) -Managers, doctors -Members of the Parliament -High-income earners (doctors, lawyers, executives...) -Politicians (2) -Decision makers -Management of large companies -Supporters of the ruling party -Senior officers -Overpaid management -Upper class (4)	-Finnish born -Well-to-do Finns -Rich Finns -Finns (2) -Swedish-speaking Finns	-Higher-education class -Highly educated (4) -Highly educated/the high paid -Highly educated "upper secondary school" -University

In addition, the "others" category was formed (*n* = 6)

Table 3 *(continued)*

MIDDLE CLASS (*n* = 151*)					
People in different economic positions (n = 48)	**People in different employment positions (*n* = 56)**	**Middle-class people (*n* = 23)**	**People in margins of society (*n* = 11)**	**Educated people (*n* = 5)**	**Ordinary people (*n* = 8)**
-Low salary, elderly, students -Low-income-earner Finns -Middle-income earners who earn less -Low-income earners (7) -Poor (3) -Poor, (e.g., the elderly and the unemployed regardless of themselves) -Poor/low earning -People with very little money -Very little money and unemployed -Under-privileged (2) -Those on bread pay -Working for the bread -Workers living below the income limit -Low-income earners/ blue-collar workers -Low-wage jobs -Middle-income earners (12) -Middle-income working people -Middle-income people -Normal income -Normal-income earners -Social climbers (from the lower classes through education) middle-income middle class -Well-to-do -Well-to-do/ people with satisfactory income -High-income earners (2) -Wealthy (2) -Income limit above 3000€ per month	-Blue-collar worker -Workers (9) -Workers, unstable economy -Laborers (7) -Employees (2) -Basic workers/ blue-collar workers -Basic workers (3) -Basic level -Working class -Working-class, low-income earners -Working people (2) -Physical workers -Others in stable employment -Wage earner -Wage earners -Young people in employment -Entrepreneurs (2) -Practical nurses, cleaners, entrepreneurs -Unemployed (6) -Unemployed jobseekers -Long-term unemployed and intermittent employees -Straight unemployed -Pensioner (2) -The elderly (4) -Students (4)	-Upper middle class (3) -Lower middle class (3) -Middle class (14) -Middle-class people -Working middle-class -Workers in the middle class	-Homo-sexuals -Immigrant -Racist expression a. (2) -Refugees -Racist expression b. -Racist expression c. -Russians -Rabble -Social security bum -Socially excluded people	-Academics (2) -Well-educated -Highly educated -Upper secondary school leavers	-Finns -Ordinary (3) -Ordinary people -Normal -Hetero-sexuals -People living in cities

In addition, the "others" category was formed (*n* = 3).
* The total number of class terms here is greater than for the highest and lowest ones because from the hierarchies that had an even number of class terms listed, we included both middle-ranked categories.

Table 3 *(continued)*

THE LOWEST CLASS (*n* = 115)				
Economically disadvantaged people (n = 38)	**Non-working people (*n* = 42)**	**Marginalized people (*n* = 13)**	**People from outside Finland (*n* = 13)**	**People in minorities (*n* = 9)**
-Poor-income earners - Under-privileged -Poorly paid/ unemployed -Poor-income earners and inactive -Poorest -Poor (8) -Poor/ pensioners/ students -Poor (pensioners, living on social assistance, disabled, immigrants, unemployed) -Poor people -Poor (long-term unemployed, etc.) -Poor (unemployed, students, etc.) -Totally poor -Those living on social benefits (2) -Low-income earners/elderly people/poor/pensioners/students -Socially secured -Social security bums -Those living on benefits -Unemployed, pensioners, students, etc. dependent on social support -Unemployed and the poor -Unemployed people living on social benefits -Disadvantaged (6) -Disadvantaged (people with long-term illnesses, people with disabilities, etc.) -Disadvantaged /recipients of social benefit from the Social Insurance Institution (Kela)/Recipients of income support -Disadvantaged/ unemployed -Low-income earners/unemployed/students	-Pensioners (4) -Bad pension -Those who are not interested in working -Students (7) -Students/ pensioners -Low-income pensioners, etc. -People with temporary work -Persons not in employment for one reason or another -Incapacitated on early retirement -Unemployed (15) -Unemployed (e.g., students) -Unemployed/ sick -Unemployed/ social security bums (2) -Unemployed/ socially excluded (3) -Elderly -White trash	-Alkies/druggies -Homeless -Drifters and drug gangs -Druggies -Saddest ones -Socially excluded (2) -Socially excluded (e.g., alcoholics and drug users) -People excluded from working life (alcohol addiction, etc.) -People outside society -People excluded from society -Unworthy for society -Less capable	-Economic refugees -Low-income earners with foreign background -Illegal immigrants -Immigrants (6) -Racist expression -Refugees -Refugees and asylum seekers -Swedish-speaking Finns	-Homosexuals -Gays -Racist expression -People with severe disabilities -Rubbish -Sexual minorities -People with disabilities (2) -Minorities and disadvantaged (e.g., the disabled, elderly, and non-heterosexual)

In addition, the “others” category was formed (*n* = 10).

Stage 3: Overarching Themes of Diverse Class Categories

In the third phase of the analysis, we noticed that the diverse class categories we constructed from the class terms the young people placed at the highest and lowest levels of the hierarchy in Phase 2 formed pairs, whereby the class categories related to the class terms at the highest level expressed a highly valued quality, and the class categories related to the class terms at the lowest level expressed a poorly valued quality. The class categories based on class terms in the middle could be seen as continuities between the two. Based on these findings, we identified five overarching themes of diverse class categories: economy, employment, power, majority/minority, and education. The class categories describing the highest, middle, and lowest social classes were linked to these five overarching themes as follows. 1) While the theme of economy was expressed in the highest class category in terms of the economically well-off and in the lowest class category in terms of the economically disadvantaged, the spectrum in the middle was wider and included people with high, middle, and low incomes. 2) The theme of employment was based on participation in working life, which was typified by employed people (the highest class category) and the non-working (the lowest class category), while the class category in the middle was described in terms of employed, unemployed, and otherwise outside working life. 3) The theme of power was expressed through people in a position of power (the highest class category), marginalized (the lowest class category), and middle-classness and ordinariness (the class category in the middle). 4) The theme of majority/minority was manifested by being a Finn (the highest class category) and foreigners and other minorities (the lowest class category). Interestingly, various groups of people belonging to the margins of society were also placed in the class category in the middle. Finally, 5) regarding the theme of education, no class terms in the lowest class were related to this theme. In the highest class category, emphasis was on the highly educated, while different levels of education were mentioned for the class category in the middle (see Table 4).

Table 4 *Formation of Overarching Themes Based on Class Categories at Vertical Levels of Hierarchy*

Class	Economy	Employment	Power	Majority/ minority	Education
Highest class	Economically well-off people	Employed people	People in positions of power	Finns	Highly-educated people
Class in the middle	People in different economical positions	People in different employment positions	Middle-class people and Ordinary people	People in margins of society	Educated people
Lowest class	Economically disadvantaged people	Non-working people	Marginalized people	People from outside Finland and People in minorities	-

Vertical and Horizontal Diversity in Class Terms

All participants listed a minimum of four class terms in their diverse class hierarchies, but nearly half of them listed five or more. The existence of several hierarchical levels and different amounts of hierarchical levels in class hierarchies indicate the vertical diversity in young people's perceptions of class hierarchies. Taking a closer look at the different class terms listed by young people at different levels of the hierarchy, we found that the diversity in social class perceptions was also abundant horizontally at different levels of hierarchy (i.e., horizontal diversity).

In terms of horizontal diversity, we noticed that at the highest level of the hierarchy, the majority of the class terms mentioned by young people were related to economic position and positions of power. Based on our findings it can be concluded that economic and power positions importantly contributed to the formation of the highest class, but at the same time, "upper classicism" based on those positions had diverse nuances (see also Table 3). In the middle of the hierarchy, most class terms were related to employment position, but economic and power positions were also often mentioned. At the lowest level of the hierarchy, class terms describing majority/minority position were mentioned more often than at other levels, alongside mentions of economic position, working life, and positions of power. While there were very few class terms describing employment position at the highest hierarchical level, they were strongly represented at the middle and lowest levels. At the middle level, they expressed labor as the characteristic of an ordinary citizen, while at the lowest level, they expressed different positions of being outside of working life. This finding may indicate that young people perceive work life position as one of the most fundamental differentiating factors in class hierarchy alongside economic position. Furthermore, our findings on the lowest level of the hierarchy indicate that young people perceive disadvantages in society with remarkably diverse concepts and a range of subtle nuances of inequality. (Figure 1).

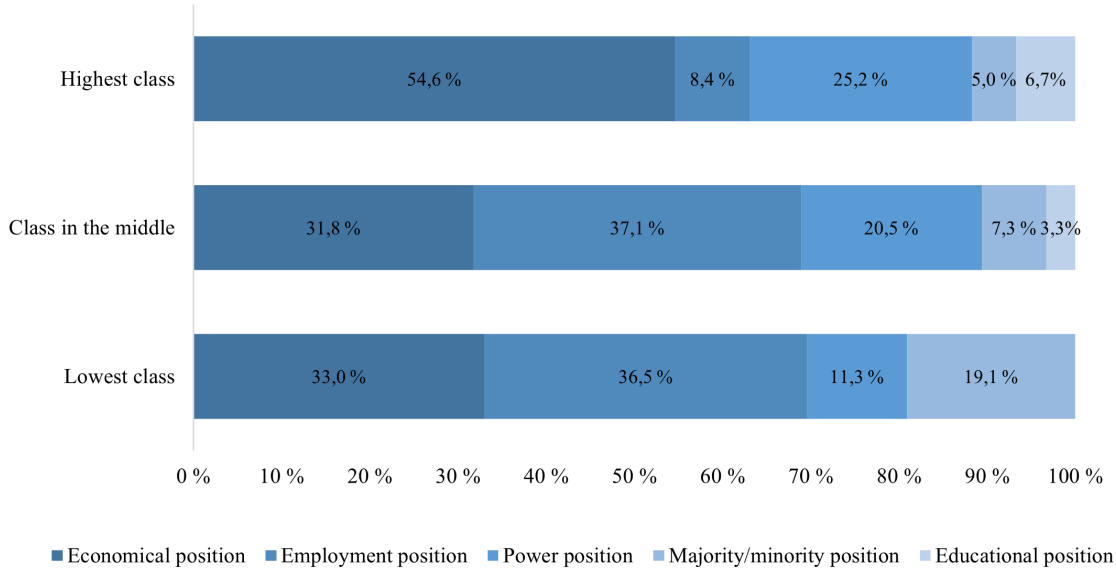

Figure 1 *Proportions (%) of Class Terms Expressing Five Overarching Themes at Different Levels of Hierarchy*

Conclusion

In this article, we explored young people's perceptions of social classes based on the terms they used to express social classes and the hierarchies they constructed. The contributions are threefold. Empirically, this article brings new knowledge on how young people perceive social classes and hierarchies. Methodologically, utilizing the word association method allowed us to analyze young lay people's perceptions based on their everyday understandings. Theoretically, our findings support the need to include economic perspective as a relevant part of cultural class research when studying diverse, culturally bound nuances of social class.

Young people expressed social classes in a number of different class terms and formed class hierarchies in partly congruent and partly differing ways. These findings indicate both similarities in young people's everyday thinking on social classes and the simultaneous existence of several parallel forms of everyday thinking related to social class. This study clearly illustrates the diversity in laypeople's perceptions of social class; some continue to perceive social class in terms of traditional division into working, middle, and upper class, while others make use of more individualized hierarchies of multiple, intersecting inequalities (e.g., Anthias, 2012; Bottero, 2004).

Young people's lay perceptions of social class showed discernible diversity both vertically and horizontally. In terms of vertical diversity, the class hierarchies constructed by young people were based on different kinds of logic. One half of the class hierarchies were based on one or two factors. These hierarchies followed a more straightforward logic based on economic capital, education, or traditional class terminology (e.g., working class, middle class, and upper class). The other half of the class hierarchies were more diverse, with more numerous and partly overlapping factors. These hierarchies combined qualitatively different characteristics that create and maintain inequality in society. Our findings are in line with prior cultural class research according to which lay people perceive social class in terms of related culture-specific nuances (e.g., Bottero, 2004; Harrits & Pedersen, 2018; Irwin, 2015, 2018). However, differing from previous research, the results of our study shed more light on diverse class hierarchies as our respondents had more diverse perceptions of social class than those found in previous studies (e.g., Harrits & Pedersen, 2018).

In addition to the vertical diversity, we identified ample horizontal diversity, which has gained scarce attention in prior cultural class research. First, we found that young people conceptualized social classes through a rich variety of different terms related to the economy, employment, power, majority/minority position, and education (see Table 3). Even though these themes are familiar from former class research, our study sheds light on the diversity of the ways in which young people perceived and made sense of these themes in their own words from the perspective of their everyday lives. Second, horizontal diversity shows that the aforementioned themes did not receive equal attention at the highest, middle, and lowest levels of hierarchy (see Figure 1). While the theme of economy was strongly represented at all levels of hierarchy, the theme of employment was typically represented at the middle and lowest levels of hierarchy and the theme of power at the highest level.

These findings are in line with previous studies showing that economic factors form the basis of laypeople's social class perceptions (e.g., Harrits & Pedersen, 2018; Irwin, 2015, 2018; Payne & Grew, 2005). Economic factors were also strongly represented in class hierarchies based on one or two factors identified in the first stage of our analysis, so our study strongly suggests that in laypeople's perceptions, social class is still intimately linked to money and the positions determined by it.

Furthermore, our empirical findings support the need to include economic factors in culturalist class analysis because they are imbued with cultural meaning (Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 196). It seemed that young people's perceptions of economic factors of class were especially imbued with culturally specific conceptions on inequality typical of neoliberal ethos, which has expanded principles and discourses of market relations to other aspects of life (Komulainen et al., 2000). For young people, economy clearly served as one basis for constructing and defining relations between different classes. Placing rich people above the poor ones in the class hierarchy implied young people's perception of the nature of social rela-

tionships between those classes whereby the rich have more prestige and possibilities in society provided by their well-off economic status than the poor. In so doing, the relationship between class and culture in young people's perceptions of social class was found implicitly, at least, as Devine and Savage (2000) have put it, "in the way in which outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination" (p. 195).

In an article on class classifications in neoliberalism, Tyler (2015) indicated that attempts to define class categories or hierarchies can actually build and maintain them. Class categories and hierarchies not only describe society but also have consequences for society; while defining opportunities for action, they also set boundaries for agency. Stemming from prevailing ideologies, class categories and hierarchies establish forms and norms of appreciation as well as methods of evaluation for societies and human interaction. Therefore, Tyler (2015) argued that instead of studying class categories, research should focus on critically revealing what kind of consequences they have on individuals' perceptions and actions.

In our study, money was linked in young people's class perceptions to work and power, and in particular to the possibility to exercise power and agency, which may reflect the neoliberal ethos in Finnish society. Following Tyler's (2015) view, young people's lay perceptions of social classes and class hierarchies may both reflect and contribute to their understanding of the frames of possibilities and agency in society (e.g., Hitlin & Long, 2009). Studying young people's lay perceptions of social class in relation to agency more carefully is crucial, as it may provide valuable information about how they perceive the link between the structures of society, such as social class (which enables different possibilities for different people in society) and individuals' agency. In addition, this information may shed light on young people's ways of understanding (the operation of) inequality in society, which, in turn, may affect their perceptions of their own opportunities in life as well as their possibilities for individual agency and action in society.

Therefore, we argue that studying lay perceptions of social class per se is not a problem. Rather, the issue is when participants are not asked to name social classes in their own words, and instead their accounts are regarded as reflecting the class categories derived by the researchers themselves, often using traditional class terminology. This may result in the fact—also criticized by Bottero (2004)—that even though cultural class research understands class as cultural, individualized, and implicit, there has nevertheless been a tendency to think of class in terms of collective, explicit, and opposing class categories, similar to former class theories. However, cultural class research has made it clear that cultures are hierarchical in themselves and produce class-based hierarchies through different mundane practices and processes. Individualized lay perceptions on social class are formed based on those everyday practices (Irwin, 2015, 2018; Savage, 2000). Our results suggest that participant-driven methods—such as the word association method used in this study—may provide a means to reach more authentically cultural, individualized, and implicit everyday understandings of social class.

The fact that economic and cultural factors were embedded together in the majority of young people's diverse class hierarchies reflect the holistic nature of social classes. In fact, several scholars over the past 20 years have called for more holistic research approaches as a way to renew the field of class research so that it can address new and subtle forms of inequalities in society (e.g., Devine & Savage, 2000, p. 184). The young people in this study saw connections between different aspects of class—such as economy and minority, employment and power positions—that are evident manifestations of social class inequalities in society. This was especially discernible in diverse class hierarchies where different aspects of inequality were put together in hierarchical order, showing that in young people's perceptions, there are many different types of inequalities in Finnish society. The diverse ways in which economic and social forms of advantages and disadvantages were sewn together in class hierarchies illustrates young people's keen-sighted perceptions of processes of inequality in Finnish society that balance between the competitive and welfare society. Young people's diverse everyday perceptions of social classes and class hierarchies reflected the ideologically and culturally mediated forms of appreciation and ways of evaluation that prevail and are in circulation in our society and human interaction.

Endnotes

[1] "What social classes do you think there are in Finland? In the lines below, list all those classes that come to your mind. List the classes in order of position, so that first comes the class with the highest position, and finally the lowest. List the social classes with the names you think of. Type only one social class per line and enter as many social classes as you want. If you think there are not enough lines, write the rest of the classes in the last line, separating them with a comma (,). If you think there are no social classes in Finland, write 'no classes' in the first line." The previous question in the questionnaire was: "According to some, Finnish society can be thought of as consisting of different groups of people in such a way that people belonging to some groups have a better position in our society than those belonging to some other groups. Do you think that people in Finland are treated equally, regardless of their: ..."

[2] We used a non-randomized sample, so these findings cannot be generalized across the population.

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