

CONCIERGE OR INFORMATION DESK: TEACHING SOCIAL STRATIFICATION THROUGH THE MALLING OF AMERICA*

This paper presents a sociological synthesis of critical pedagogical and andragogical teaching techniques for a multidisciplinary classroom. Field research was conducted by undergraduate students at a popular social setting: local urban and suburban malls. The objective of the assignment was to explore critically the basic sociological concepts of stratification along such dimensions as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. By extending classroom heuristics into the social world of "everyday life," this approach enables students to explore a familiar social place—the postindustrial shrine to American consumption culture—through the critical lens of the sociological imagination. The application of sociological principles learned in the classroom to the larger community or "real world" helps to enhance the relevance of sociology as a scientific discipline to students when they return to the traditional academic setting. Although the paper is based on experiences from a multidisciplinary class (N=63) that was not trained in qualitative research techniques, the assignment can be utilized effectively in more advanced undergraduate and graduate courses, including research methods classes.

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THE RAPIDLY CHANGING demographic reality of multicultural America has fostered an educational environment that is conducive to promoting and appreciating the sociological manifestations of "cultural diversity." Racially motivated violence, inter-ethnic tensions, sexual harassment, anti-immigrant movements, and increasing economic disenfranchisement of the urban poor have led to a common interest among private business, government agencies, and universities alike to sponsor educational programs that encourage intergroup tolerance. The underlying theme, however, is overcoming the "problem" of "managing" diversity. That is, the presumed threat to the idyllic stability and prosperity of American society as it endures the inevitable shift in power away from its traditional social epicenter: privileged white men. In this context, college administrators and academic programs have actively encouraged the explicit recognition of such important dimensions of social stratification as race, class, and gender in their curriculum.

We believe that the development of creative approaches to investigating and understanding the linkages among these various social groupings is central to the pedagogical mission of sociology as an academic discipline. In the process, our goal is to foster greater student sensitivity and consciousness to the deepening patterns of social inequality in postindustrial U.S. society.

EMPOWERING THE PASSIVE STUDENT AS AN ACTIVE RESEARCHER

Teaching sociology in general and social stratification in particular to a multidisciplinary group of students is the most common challenge that we face in the undergraduate classroom. Many students presume that sociology is an overly intellectualized set of common-sense principles that offer little insight into their understanding of society or their everyday life experiences. This negative view of sociology as a "soft" social science necessitates innovative classroom approaches to these topics. This is especially relevant to the exploration of race, class, and gender stratification in the United States (Bohmer and Briggs 1991; Cohen 1995; Martinez 1994). Students from relatively

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privileged backgrounds or those aspiring to achieve socioeconomic mobility tend to perceive such topics as simply the agenda of those "other" oppressed groups (identity politics) or "left-wing" critics whose objective is to highlight the malevolent features of U.S. society. In this context, our goal is to overcome resistance to the topic through the interactive design of an "objective" field study project. Indeed, this approach enables students to escape the confines of traditional, passive learning by empowering them through the self-selection of their particular fieldwork settings (malls), identification of specific patterns of stratification that interest them (race, class, gender), and the investigation of the multiple linkages (e.g. female Salvadorian cleaning crews in employment hierarchies) as guided by their recently cultivated sociological imagination.

The mall project is designed to introduce new ways of looking at a familiar social setting. Like Martinez's (1994) incorporation of mainstream ("top 40") music into the course curriculum to address issues of racism, classism, and sexism in popular culture, the examination of social stratification in the field can illustrate how systems of inequality operate in the most commonplace areas of students' lives (Boyle 1995). In our assignment, two major trends in contemporary American society guided the inquiry of the research teams: 1) the inexorable advance of rationality's "iron cage" whose social and architectural manifestations are exemplified by the suburbanization of America; and 2) growing socioeconomic inequality that underlies the postindustrial reality of stagnating household incomes, growing employment insecurity, and rising consumer debt (Harvey 1990; Manning and Williams forthcoming). These two macrosociological vistas fundamentally inform the theoretical framework for observing and interpreting patterns of social stratification as they relate to the "real world" experiences of students.

RATIONAL FORM AND SOCIAL SPACE

As an academic discipline, sociology has been influenced profoundly by the philoso-

phies of the Enlightenment. The emergence of positivism as an intellectual tradition, with its emphasis on "objective" or rational principles, is associated with the hegemonic rise of "advanced" Western societies and their relentless march to "modernity." In the process, the guiding tenets of rationality have contributed to the erosion of collective social bonds (*gemeinschaft*) in the liberating pursuit of individual potential and self-interest through the mediating influences of the marketplace (*gesellschaft*). Furthermore, with the rise of Weberian efficiency in the form of bureaucratic organizations, sociologists have conceptualized rationality—with due respect to Simmel—as a dialectic between personal freedom and social alienation. More recently, George Ritzer has critiqued the presumed superiority of "universal" principles of rationality as they influence social and economic change in American society. He argues that this process of "McDonaldization can be viewed as leading to inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability, and loss of control" (Ritzer 1993:121). It is "over"-rationalized institutions such as shopping malls that lead to dehumanization in the work place as well as in other facets of everyday life.

The contemporary manifestations of this "McDonaldization" phenomenon are exemplified by the expansion of suburban Levittowns (Gans 1982) and ubiquitous fast-food restaurants such as Wendy's, Taco Bell, and, of course, McDonald's. Indeed, the proliferation of the latter influences the lives of virtually every American and international visitor alike by moving the market into the family, through the commodification of household consumption and leisure activities, and the family into the market through the growth of low-wage, unskilled employment (Reiter 1991). The process of integrating consumers/workers into the U.S. cultural and capitalist labor regime respects few boundaries, penetrating both the public and private spheres of social life through the expansive tentacles of Weber's "Iron Cage of Rationality." Hence, the "irrationality of rationality" is a pivotal concept in the investigation of the malling of America.

The guiding principles of the fast-food industry have accelerated both the demise of community-centered clusters of “mom and pop” retail stores (romanticized as Mainstreet USA) and the replacement of these stores by corporate, chain-dominated malls of Wall Street USA. Within this postindustrial shrine to mass consumption, all the “necessities” of life are available in a centralized location of the suburban periphery. Furthermore, they do not require any prior information or personal social relationships, simply a standardized medium of exchange. That is, money or its most efficient transactional form: credit cards.

The most extreme expression of commercialized interpersonal relationships and community self-sufficiency is the popular “theming of America.” For example, CityWalk of Los Angeles presents an “idealized reality” of urban life that blurs the line between the authentic and the virtual by providing an inaccurate, pristine world view to those born in the “post-mall” era (Booth 1996). The “theming of America” trend underlies the new generation of malls: the “megamall.” As a recent account of this phenomenon explains: “It’s all in the mall. That’s the point. People can shop here, eat here, sleep here, get married here, and, as long as they have money [or credit cards]...can exist in here indefinitely” (Finkel 1995:30). The ongoing debate over the proposed \$350 million American Dream megamall project in suburban Washington, DC illuminates the tensions arising from imposing rational forms on everyday life. According to Stephen Fehr (1996), the banality of the enclosed virtual community is miraculously repackaged and marketed as personalized and localized shopping centers, so that it feels as if they are part of the community. This is illustrated by the increasing shift away from neighborhood activities that affirm community bonds such as “trick or treating” during Halloween to the impersonal or superficial relationships of the antiseptic mall.

The fundamental tenets of McDonaldization—functional specialization and standardization—underlie the incorporation of efficiency, quantifiable calculability, and predictability in its spatial forms

(Ritzer 1993). The presumed standardization of the suburban mall, however, contrasts with the reality purported by the simplified McDonaldization thesis. That is, there exists tremendous variation across shopping malls, despite their rationally inspired function and standardized architectural design. In addition to variations in degrees of rationalization, the students explored socioeconomic variations between the specified groups of malls. This task empowered the students to look beyond malls as efficiently organized forms of mass consumption and to observe the patterns of social stratification that pervade their physical structures.

THE ASSIGNMENT: GOING TO THE MALL

Malls are a central feature of American suburbanization and metropolitan sprawl. They offer nearly everything, from lottery tickets and hobby collectibles such as baseball cards, to medical clinics and financial services (bank branches), as well as more familiar retailers such as department stores, clothing stores, bookstores, beauty salons, and restaurants. Additionally, malls serve an increasingly important social function as a multi-use, public space. They offer familiar places where the elderly can walk or converse with friends, teen-agers can hang out at video arcades or the movies, and families can meet at the food court. Today, suburban malls represent rationally designed “mini-hubs” of the postindustrial metropolitan landscape (Palen 1995). In fact, they have eclipsed the traditional central business districts in their commercial importance and are convincingly portrayed as containing “no unsavory bars or pornography shops, no threatening-looking characters, no litter, no rain, and no excessive heat or cold” (Jackson 1985: 260). Since suburban malls have become the signature structure of the postindustrial era (Kowinski 1985), exploring these “cathedrals of postwar culture” for a course assignment is both timely and relevant to undergraduate students.

The students in our mall project were enrolled in an upper-level sociol-

ogy/American studies course entitled *"Malls, Money and Madonna: Popular Culture in the 1980s."*¹ The class featured a multidisciplinary mix of students and included only five sociology majors; most of the 63 students at our private, Washington, DC university were business, communications, international studies, or political science majors. Although the project required little experience with qualitative research techniques, a simple comparative design (two to four malls) guided the participant observation and the brief interviews that comprised most of the students' research.

Overall, the class was organized into 15 independent research teams of four or five students. Each team selected one research site from at least two of the three groups of malls that were identified by the instructor based on the socioeconomic profile of the stores and their respective clienteles. (See Appendix A.) Since few students had experience with sociological research, we provided each team with recent literature and suggested guidelines. This procedure ensured that their fieldwork would be guided by sociologically informed questions and that the results could be compared during the subsequent class discussion. Also, the three groups of malls provided students with an implicit comparison along the sociological dimensions of class, race, and gender. (See Appendix B.) Not incidentally, the flexibility in choosing their own research sites enabled teams to combine their research interests with the logistical practicalities of traveling to particular malls; students had the option of taking the subway or traveling by private car.

The importance of a critical pedagogical foundation has been noted by others who have sought to foster in-depth analyses and perceptive social critiques among undergraduate students unfamiliar with sociological fieldwork (Stroecker et al. 1993). Indeed,

¹ The primary texts assigned in this course were: Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, *America: What Went Wrong?*, 1992; Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, *Adventures in Medialand*, 1993; Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, 1994; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 1985; and George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 1993.

our pedagogical assumptions were that the lack of experience with fieldwork-based assignments and the need to comprehend unfamiliar disciplinary principles were essential to the successful completion of the project (Knowles 1990:64). Furthermore, "going to the mall" formed the basis of expanding the traditional professor-guided learning experience by encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their own learning in a self-directed, "real world" laboratory. This latter approach, called the andragogical technique, entails extending classroom boundaries into the larger community as well as applying pedagogical tools to a familiar social place. This experiential approach involves students personally in their subject matter, highlighting the connection between individual experiences and sociological phenomena (Grauerholz and Copenhagen 1994).

For the class, the suburban mall became the microsocial setting for investigating macrotheoretical issues. In this case, the macrotheoretical issues include the manner in which underlying processes such as rationalization and stratification reveal themselves in observable patterns (Burawoy et al. 1991). Students examined specific features of their selected malls, such as the surrounding physical environment (entrance, parking, sidewalks), financial condition (unoccupied spaces, needed repairs, open-air merchants), design of interior space (escalators, lighting, plants), types of stores (prestige anchors, discounters, specialties), clientele (social class, gender, race, ethnicity), nationality as well as race/ethnicity and gender of merchants (especially subcontractors within stores) and employees, pricing structure (including types of credit cards accepted or interest-free purchase options), mall names and distinctive linguistic terms, treatment of shoppers by employees, safety/security issues, and the presence of "mall zombies" as a crude indicator of the dehumanizing effects associated with "irrationality of rationality." Together, these research topics illuminated many key features of stratification in postindustrial America.

After the mall fieldwork was completed, individual research teams collaborated on their final report of 10 to 15 pages, based on

a cooperatively negotiated division of labor. All projects reported observations from their fieldwork, including an introduction and conclusion, with most citing appropriate course readings. Some groups presented their observations systematically with tables, graphs, and photographs², while others preferred a simple narrative approach. All of the papers examined different patterns of stratification (race, class, and to a lesser extent gender) across the selected malls and assessed whether their findings confirmed the McDonaldization research hypothesis or supported its null hypothesis. (Note, the latter posits that all malls—regardless of presumed architectural standardization and functional purpose—eventually attain their own social identity and cultural distinctiveness.) A lively discussion followed each team's formal presentation of their findings to the class. This led to a consensus of opinion that the variation across malls was startling and unexpected. In fact, many students admitted that they had never visited a working-class mall and were astounded to find that all malls "are not created equal." We then concluded with an in-class demonstration of the popular board game, "Mall Madness," and debated whether it reinforces class, gender, and racial/ethnic stereotypes (see Mitchell 1996).

STUDENTS' FINDINGS

Overall, the critical insights presented in the research reports were surprisingly sophisticated. The following statement summarizes their findings:

Whoever said you can't judge a book by its cover has apparently never been to [an upper-middle-class and a working-class] mall, both in the same afternoon...from first glance, we knew that the

² Students were instructed to photograph only physical features of the malls such as exterior landscaping, parking lots, entrances, elevators, and window displays; they were encouraged to respect the privacy of people working or shopping in the malls. Nevertheless, as one reviewer remarked, the ethics of taking pictures in public places merits greater attention. This issue will be addressed by assigning readings on ethical issues involved in conducting social science research such as voluntary participation, ensuring no harm to participants, and deception of unwilling subjects. This could include class discussion of *The Ethics and Politics of Social Science Research* (Babbie 1994).

two malls were different. This remained true, right from the structure itself, to anchors, to clientele, employees, even security.... We were surprised by many of our observations.

Students immediately identified the stark difference in the composition of department stores, such as Neiman Marcus or Saks Fifth Avenue *vis-a-vis* Woolworths, J.C. Penny or C.C. Murphy (a Woolworths' discount chain). All of the groups identified these contrasting commercial "anchors" as a defining characteristic of stratification across the malls. Even so, the presence of upscale or downscale mall anchors was often misconstrued as a product of different consumer "tastes" rather than a predictable outcome of socioeconomic factors resulting from the deliberate targeting of specific consumer characteristics by mall developers and department store chains. Table 1 summarizes some of these features by the social class profile of the mall patrons.

The research teams also noted striking differences in terms of the racial and ethnic patterns of the malls' respective clienteles. For instance, upscale malls are characterized by the overwhelming predominance of white patrons, regardless of geographic location. This pattern cannot be dismissed as simply an artifact of the unequal spatial distribution of minorities; although nearly three-fourths of the District of Columbia and about one-third of the Maryland/Virginia suburbs are comprised of racial/ethnic minorities, in absolute numbers there are far more minorities living in the suburbs than in the city (Manning 1995; Manning and Butera 1994). This feature remains consistent across all upscale malls observed in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area—independent of urban/suburban location. Similarly, the working-class malls were generally described as featuring a largely minority (African American, Asian, Latino) or multicultural clientele. Together, these patterns suggest a strong racial/ethnic "effect" since the comparative research design effectively controlled for the social class of the mall patrons. This finding provoked a lively discussion of race versus class stratification, as many middle-class minorities clearly prefer shopping in malls where they are a numeri-

Table 1. Social Class Stratification in the Mall: Student Observations

Working-Class Mall		Upper-Middle-Class Mall
Name: P.G. Plaza Information Desk Parking Lot Employees Eatery. Public, Mass, and Private Entrance Billboard: Low Tech; Asphalt Environs.	Linguistic Terminology	Name: Mazza Galeria Concierge Valet Parking Sales Consultants Food Court.
Austere Entrance: Artificial Plants Linoleum Floors Uniform Lighting Single Level. Artwork: Unframed, School Children Display, Security Staff Photos.	Transportation	Private Automobile
Anchor: JC Penney, CC Murphy. Subcontracting: rugs, furniture, jewelry, check cashing, sports cards, women's fingernail designs, shoemaker.	Surrounding Physical Environment	Entrance Billboard: Digital High Tech; Lushly Landscaped.
Specialty Retailers: African Eyes, Incense, African American Fraternity/Sorority Clothing, Ethnic Craft and Clothing (African, Indian imports), African American bookstore, Christian retail.	Physical Mall Environment	Ornate Entrance: Live Plants/Brass Railing Marble Floors Chandelier Lighting Multitiered. Artwork: Commissioned Statues, Professional Art (For Sale).
Chain: Burger King, Roy Roger's, Jerry's, Taco Bell, Subway, Popeye's Chicken, Mohammad Ali's Rotisserie Chicken. Independent Ethnic: Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican.	Composition of Retail Stores	Anchor: Neiman Marcus, Macy's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Ann Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Nordstrom's.
Patrons: Minorities, teenagers, multicultural. Retail Employees: African American, Latino, teenagers, seniors. Mall Security: uniformed, visible, obtrusive. African American, Hispanic, few whites.	Food Venues	Specialty Retailers: Franklin Mint, Museum Store, Bonsai Horticulture, Sharper Image, Nature Company, Georgetown Gallery.
	Social Composition	Ethnic: Chinese, Greek, Italian, French, Russian. Full-Service Restaurants: Sushi Bar, Kobe Japan, Sahib's Rotisserie, Houlihan's, Samurai, Godiva Chocolatier.
		Patrons: Predominantly white (European). Retail Employees: white, Asian, career professionals. (African Americans, Latinos in food court). Mall Security: inconspicuous, casual dress. Primarily white, some African Americans.

cal majority. In future projects, we will encourage students to interview minority patrons about the reasons for their choice of malls.

These two discernible dimensions, socioeconomic class and race/ethnicity, became the initial prisms through which the groups explored the more subtle issues of stratification in the American mall. This included the "quality" of stores, the variety of products, the social composition of clientele and employees, the aesthetics of physical space, retail prices, and the types of informal shops that were situated in the corridors.

This view was echoed in another commonly reported distinction between malls: the maintenance of the interior structures. As one student team remarked, "an immediate impression of cleanliness, newness, and affluence [distinguished the more up-

scale malls], while low ceilings, dark corridors, and worn tiles distinguished the working-class malls." The brightness (natural lighting, chandeliers) and unobstructed openness of the middle- and upper-middle-class malls fosters a more aesthetically pleasing shopping experience than the drab and more mundane atmosphere of working-class malls. Such an effect in upscale malls is consistent with their architectural design since they cultivate a sensation of pleasurable desire through the "landscape" of the interior area (Asensio Cerver 1995). The research teams reported several other astute insights into the social organization of physical space. For example, one group "mapped" the location of stores along a hierarchical dimension of status consumption and ease of access by consumers. This relationship illustrated social class distinc-

Table 2. "How Much Is That Outfit In the Window?":
Selected Clothing Combinations by Gender and Socio-Economic Class*

Working-Class Mall	Upper-Middle-Class Mall
Women's Clothing	
J.C. Penney: Work Jacqueline Ferrar Suit \$179 Worthington Purse \$39 Jockey Pantyhose \$5 JF Shoes \$39 Total = \$262	Saks Fifth Avenue: Work Dana Buchanan Suit \$678 Oscar de la Renta Hat \$100 Donna Karan Pantyhose \$9 Ferragamo Shoes \$235 Total = \$1,022
J.C. Penney: Formal Sten'nay Dress \$150 Hanes Pantyhose \$11 Underwear \$8 Adonna Strapless Bra \$21 Gloria Vanderbilt Shoes \$40 Total = \$230	Saks Fifth Avenue: Formal Saks Gown \$1,800 Pantyhose \$16 Panties \$19 Natori Strapless Bra \$33 Kenneth Cole Shoes \$98 Total = \$1,966
J.C. Penney: Casual Lee Jeans \$33 Hunt Club T-Shirt \$19 Dare to Dress Vest \$56 ProKeds \$36 Total = \$144	Saks Fifth Avenue: Casual Calvin Klein Jeans \$52 Calvin Klein T-Shirt \$20 Jean Jacket \$78 DKNY Sneakers \$48 Total = \$198
Men's Clothing	
Montgomery Ward Hill & Archer Suit \$95 Wentworth Shirt \$14 Botany 500 Tie \$12 Joe Boxer Boxers \$14 Gold Cup Socks \$3 Bugle Boy Belt \$22 Jonathan Rich Shoes \$40 Total = \$200	Neiman Marcus Giorgio Armani Suit \$1,325 Ermengildo Zegna Shirt \$125 Brioni Tie \$160 Joe Boxer Boxers \$14 Polo Socks \$17 Neiman Marcus Belt \$85 Salvador Ferragamo Shoes \$315 Total = \$2,041

* These items were selected randomly without regard to brand or price by the student research team.

tions between, as well as, within, malls by highlighting the Weberian notion of identifiable consumption groups that are both spatially and socially separated: "Stores such as McDonald's and Record Town were on the lower level, while upper-class stores such as Ann Taylor were on the upper levels." Similarly, another team noted that fast-food restaurants were on the first floor to accommodate less affluent "walk-in" traffic, whereas an expensive, "after-hours" restaurant was on the "penthouse" level.

These statements suggest that cultivated awareness of social class distinctions provided new avenues of critical inquiry for these students. This theme was revisited in the perceptive observations of students in another group. They concluded that, out of a total of almost 250 stores enumerated in two malls, only 10 percent were common to both, implying a distinct socioeconomic and ethnic concentration of establishments that mirrored nearby communities. For example, African Americans residing in suburban Maryland were specifically targeted in a

working-class mall by at least four racially oriented bookstores that featured prominent African American authors. This cluster of minority "niche" merchants, which included the sale of other culturally specific products and services (e.g. African American fraternity and sorority garments), was noticeably absent in the upscale malls.

Students also discussed the quality and selection of goods as an indicator of an upscale or downscale mall. These differences were often associated with discount pricing and sophisticated advertising strategies. As one student team noted:

In [the upscale mall], prices are shadowed from the consumer, while at [the lower-class mall], the low, discount prices are what the stores use to attract buyers. [While] the former have mannequins engaged in different activities showing the clothes...which are supposed to sell themselves, the latter plaster the windows with signs advertising sales on the merchandise.

Clearly, each mall appeals to distinctly different groups of customers or "market segments." This is illustrated in Table 2,

which presents a comparison of the prices of various clothing combinations identified by our research teams: outfits were selected to highlight differences by social class of the mall and by gender. In addition to the malls' niche marketing strategies, students recognized a distinction between the social composition of salespeople and their clients by "type" of mall. For instance, students reported frequently that employees of the working-class malls were less courteous and friendly, whereas workers at the upscale malls were more helpful and solicitous. Although browsing was observed at all malls, employees of upscale malls appeared more enthusiastic and often conversed with customers. Students observed these different forms of social interaction as employees greeted potential customers and offered assistance.

Also instructive is the socioeconomic composition of mall employees and the services offered by the different types of malls. For example, the working-class malls were more likely to have teenagers, minorities, and seniors providing basic or functionally "necessary" services. Meanwhile, the upper-class malls were staffed more frequently by young and middle-aged professional sales "consultants" whose compensation is linked to the successful cultivation of client lists and long-term satisfaction of their customers. Not surprisingly, the former feature minimum wages accompanied by high employee turnover while the latter are often "career employees" whose modest hourly wages are commonly supplemented with sales commissions. On the one hand, the stores of working-class malls are primarily price sensitive and thus seek to minimize employee contact with patrons in order to maximize worker "productivity." The stores of the upper-class malls, on the other hand, encourage the nurturing of personal relationships in order to foster customer loyalty among price *insensitive* patrons. Of course, such a preliminary conclusion requires a more in-depth field project than entailed by this assignment.

Malls' stratification is also indicated by their physical layout and interior design. For example, working-class malls are distinguished by their austere design, low ceil-

ings, artificial plants, minimalist lighting, absence of professional artwork, obtrusive rap and booming rock music, and single-level structures. In fact, one working-class mall lacks both a full-service restaurant and a movie theater. In comparison, the upper-class malls feature finely crafted chandeliers, sculptures, gardens with fishponds and water fountains, high ceilings, sophisticated lighting systems, spiral staircases, elevators, soothing classical music, professional art, fine restaurants, and even upscale hotels. One team reported that mounted paintings and photographs (for sale by artists) adorned the walls of the "food court" of an upper-class mall, whereas watercolors drawn by elementary school students were taped on the walls of the working-class mall. Furthermore, the students observed wide variation in the malls' restaurant options, both in terms of type of food and dining experience. In the working-class malls, restaurants were limited to the common "eatery" area and were comprised of generally low quality, fast-food retailers (Taco Bell, Popeye's, Jerry's). The more upscale malls, in comparison, offered a wider range of food choices (including French, Russian, and Japanese cuisine) with fewer corporate chains and more full-service restaurants that offered alcoholic beverages. Some groups even remarked that the price-value of the food was much lower in the working-class venues.

One particularly perceptive team noted differences in the form of customer payments including the use of various credit options. Although all malls had at least one ATM for immediate access to cash, the stores in the working-class malls generally refused or discouraged personal checks while some advertised "convenient" lay-away plans. Also, the upscale malls featured full service bank branches whereas patrons of working-class malls were limited to the impersonal relations of ATMs or costly cash checking outlets (Manning and Williams forthcoming). Interestingly, the upper- and middle-class malls aggressively promoted both their respective corporate credit cards (Macy's, Nordstrom's) with discounts (10%) or free gifts to new applicants and other forms of consumer credit

such as American Express and Mastercard. One group noted the explicit inequality in these marketing campaigns. That is, those receiving corporate discounts had money (in the form of good credit) whereas those with the least financial resources were unable to qualify for these much needed discounts. Also, one upscale mall featured an American Express Travel Center conveniently located for international visitors or business travelers. Such discretionary, leisure-oriented services are noticeably absent from the working-class malls.

Mall security also drew students' attention. Although students observed security guards in all of the malls, their roles and visibility contrasted sharply across mall types. In working-class malls, security staff wear uniforms that resemble public police and their conspicuous patrol of corridors, stores, and parking lots was noted in most student papers. Additionally, in one working-class mall, the entire security force was introduced to mall patrons through "friendly" photographs of their activities, which were mounted on the corridor walls adjacent to the "eatery." Clearly, the security staff enforces the authority of the mall management and maintains general social "order." This role is evidenced by their imposing physical presence (mostly young, big, African American men), distinctive uniforms, and the prominent display of pistols and nightsticks. On the other hand, the security staff was much less noticeable in the upper-class malls. There, security personnel (mostly white and some African American men) were much less visible as their uniforms were more casual (khaki shorts in the summer) and there were no visible firearms. One group concluded that the unobtrusive presence of security in upscale malls was a conscious decision to preserve the pleasant ambiance of the shopping experience and, in the process, to reassure patrons of their safety in the mall.

McDONALDIZATION

Despite the plethora of differences observed among the malls, students also noted similarities that supported the McDonaldization research hypothesis. For instance, the basic

mall design is predictable and consistent across socioeconomic boundaries due to its underlying function: promoting uninterrupted consumption. The most obvious example is the climate-controlled environment that shelters mall patrons from seasonal weather changes. This functional purpose, however, is not static. As "edge" cities have emerged in suburbia, malls have responded to changing social demands by providing more entertainment activities such as theaters, restaurants, and night clubs. In fact, the time may come when one can be born in a clinic, educated in a private school, live in a tower apartment, work in an office, consult with a lawyer, and even make funeral arrangements—all within the spatial confines of the suburban mall. Furthermore, nearly all stores accept various consumer credit cards, although the motivation for their use (convenience or necessity) cannot be easily ascertained. The growing popularity of this method of payment—by both consumers and retailers—ensures that the engine of mass consumption will never run out of "gas" even during periods of economic stagnation (Manning and Williams forthcoming).

These rationally conceived features of the American shopping mall are not equally available to the diverse communities of U.S. society. For instance, retailing executives are reluctant to invest in a commercial complex that will attract a large number of minorities, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Webb Pressler and Perez-Rivas 1996). This policy is illustrated by a working-class mall located in Prince George's County, Maryland where African Americans are a demographic majority and a large number of new immigrants (Latino, Asian, African) have arrived recently. Although the county includes many prosperous minority communities, it has failed to lure any upscale departments stores such as Lord & Taylor and Nordstrom's. This has provoked a maelstrom of controversy and accusations of corporate racism since the high household income of minority residents would normally attract such prominent retailers; corporate executives assume that more affluent minorities

will endure the inconvenience of traveling to predominantly white, upscale malls.

Such rationalized consumer marketing policies belie the demographic realities of multicultural America. In fact, arrogant corporate campaigns that dismiss the social and economic influence of minority groups exemplify the "irrationality of rationality" implicit to the McDonaldisation thesis. The latter is illustrated by middle-class-oriented marketing campaigns that simply translate the English text into the language of the targeted ethnic groups rather than developing advertising strategies that appeal to specific racial/ethnic market "niches" in *their* communities. As a result, to the chagrin of mall developers and retailing executives, middle-class minorities prefer to patronize commercial areas that are receptive to their racial/ethnic/cultural backgrounds rather than more elegant malls that offer a less hospitable social environment.

The "assembly-line" operation of retail sales in the mall stores is another pattern that was frequently cited in the group papers. For example, students routinely compared the division of labor at retail stores with their neighborhood fast-food restaurants: a greeter at the door, a person stationed at every department to offer assistance, and dressing room attendants. Hence, workers were described as using only a minute portion of their interpersonal skills and abilities due to the influence of rationally inspired principles of scientific labor management or "Taylorism." This uniform organization of retail work, which students noted in all mall types, underlies the dehumanizing aspects of the work process (alienation of labor) in shopping malls.

Additionally, the students cited the mall management's exercise of authority over its shops as an indicator of the need to maintain control over individual patrons. According to a paper aptly entitled, "Shopping for Conformity":

Technological and theoretical advances that seemingly make our lives less complicated, and apparently give us more choices, in fact limit our choices and restrict us to buy into whatever the norms and mores [of the mall] dictates.

This manifestation of rationality was most readily apparent in the different security policies of the malls. For instance, most students were not surprised that security in the upscale malls was innocuous whereas uniformed officers patrolled the corridors of working-class malls in a highly visible and demonstrative manner that constitutes an overt form of social control, albeit ostensibly to combat youth gangs and retail theft. The difference between employing uniformed and plain-clothed security officers is not insignificant. In the upscale malls, the absence of highly visible and armed security staff fosters the illusion of a carefree shopping excursion that precludes the need for mall surveillance. However, students often described the effect of mall security policies as contributing to dehumanization and their perception of powerlessness in everyday life. A confrontation between members of a research team and mall security illustrates this point. After a student began taking photographs for this project, two security officers immediately approached the group and verbally reprimanded them. In this situation, mall security was unable to distinguish between experiential learning and the possibility that the pictures could lead to a criminal act. Today, several national retail chains face lawsuits over capricious security policies that sanction the unnecessary harassment, embarrassment, and even wrongful arrest of minority (primarily African American) customers—a social consequence of the iron cage of rationality.³

In summary, the individuality and personal relationships of local downtown merchants have been replaced by corporate uniformity and impersonal commercial trans-

³ A recent, highly publicized incident in Prince George's County, Maryland underscores this observation. Before leaving an upscale clothing store, a security officer forced two young African American men to remove their shirts because they could not produce a sales receipt for the garments. This humiliating confrontation occurred even though a salesperson publicly stated that she remembered selling clothing to the men earlier in the week. Both men returned later with documentation of their purchases and reclaimed their garments. Significantly, the mall security refused to admit that it had acted inappropriately. The men eventually received an apology from the public affairs office of the corporate chain, but only after receiving national attention and widespread support.

actions that feature an increasingly limited range of goods across time and place in the nearest retail mecca: the suburban mall. As this assignment demonstrates, the functional design of malls is fundamentally influenced by "rational" principles that facilitate mass consumption while also embodying broader patterns of social stratification. Indeed, a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors fundamentally shape these distinctive shrines to the mass consumption society. Even so, social agency does not passively tolerate the far-reaching excesses of McDonaldization tendencies. Consumers can reject offensive marketing campaigns by refusing to buy undesirable or unnecessary products, workers can quit jobs that foster dehumanizing work roles, minorities can refuse to patronize predominately white malls that offer inhospitable social environments, low-income groups can demand newer and cleaner facilities, and shoppers can challenge invasive security policies.

PEDAGOGICAL SUCCESSES AND POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

This fieldwork assignment provided our white, primarily upper- and middle-class students with the opportunity to examine critically various dimensions of stratification in a familiar social setting. The vast majority of students enthusiastically embraced the project and lauded the opportunity for self-directed research (choosing research sites and stratification themes), collaborative learning (especially group brainstorming sessions while preparing the final report), and practical relevance of exploring everyday life "beyond the obvious." The most rewarding outcome came during the class discussion of the group reports. This offered a receptive forum for students to share their findings with each other as well as to compare patterns across all of the mall research sites. In this way, students were exposed—albeit vicariously—to the full range of mall experiences, while cultivating the germinating seeds of the sociological imagination that had been planted through earlier class readings and lectures. It was this participatory capstone to the project that demonstrated the intellectual progress achieved by

the students. They had successfully revealed the subtle processes of social stratification while presenting sophisticated analyses of how race, class, and, to a lesser extent, gender are embedded in the familiar social institution of the suburban mall. In fact, students remarked that they could never again view malls as simply architectural monuments to the mass consumption society.

The pedagogical strength of the assignment also contributed to some potential limitations. First, a few students rejected structuralist explanations of inequality and resisted the investigation of any social patterns that they perceived as negative aspects of their everyday life. These students either limited their fieldwork to brief and superficial excursions, explored the mall most similar to their socioeconomic backgrounds, or simply assumed their prior social roles as consumers by window shopping and socializing at the food court (see Boyle 1995). Second, others were uncomfortable conducting fieldwork in working-class malls with large numbers of minorities. This fear of the social unknown led to a general reluctance to take public transportation to the mall with other patrons (an important source of information) and an eagerness to expedite the fieldwork in order to move on to the more desirable middle- or upper-class malls. Hence, those uninterested in sociological research tended to avoid social contexts that differed sharply from their own personal experiences.

Another drawback concerns the explicit, collaborative nature of the project. The objective included fostering a cooperatively negotiated division of labor that would facilitate both self- and group-directed learning skills through the "carrot" of receiving a single group grade. This was a crucial feature of the assignment since it enabled students to explore social stratification through a comparative framework rather than each student simply reporting on one mall. In fact, most students commented that the most instructive aspect of the project was observing the sharp differences between the malls. Some group members, however, felt that a few students failed to contribute sufficiently to the preparation of the final report. They complained that these "free rid-

ers" received the same grade as the more conscientious students or that the "slackers" were responsible for a lower grade than the other group members deserved.

Lastly, the assignment requires considerable preparation by the instructor. Students need a specific list of malls clearly classified according to sociodemographic criteria and an extensive checklist of research topics and questions. In addition, the instructor must familiarize herself/himself with each of the research sites so that the fieldwork can be coordinated effectively and so that the instructor has specific information to facilitate the class discussion(s) of the group findings. Although this assignment is ideally suited to large cities, teaching social stratification through the postmodern culture of mass consumption is not limited to a large metropolitan setting. It can be easily adapted to less populated areas by examining "strip malls" in different socioeconomic areas, comparing "mom and pop" stores with nearby corporate chains, or simply investigating stratification *within* a single mall such as comparing different groups of stores or levels of a mall. Another option is to investigate franchises of the same corporation as they vary by the socioeconomic profile of their respective neighborhood locations. For example, students can compare Blockbuster Video stores or McDonald's restaurants in working-class, middle-class, and more affluent neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH ANDRAGOGICAL PEDAGOGY

Sociology is generally taught from a pedagogical structure of lectures, movies, computer-aided multimedia assignments, research papers, and examinations. The strength of the discipline, however, includes its systematic and readily adaptable approaches to learning. While lectures and other classroom exercises are necessary for providing a solid foundation of relevant sociological concepts, the analytical contributions of the discipline (study of societies, institutions, and social actors) can be en-

hanced by utilizing andragogical teaching techniques. Releasing undergraduate students from the traditional confines of the classroom and empowering their own investigation of familiar social spaces in the larger society illustrates one application of this technique.

In this fieldwork assignment, students successfully explored the social stratification of the malling of America in the extended classroom of metropolitan Washington, DC. Although the students had little experience in sociological research, they presented relatively sophisticated analyses. The awareness of race, class, and gender issues, cultivated through course readings and lectures, effectively informed the fieldwork of the students. This was not easily achieved since the privileged backgrounds of our white (mostly middle- and upper-middle-class) students rarely encourages them to critically analyze U.S. society in general and social stratification in particular. We believe that the innovative synthesis of andragogical and critical pedagogical teaching styles, achieved by incorporating real life experiences into the academic classroom, offers exciting opportunities for undergraduate students to learn about important sociological issues such as race, class, and gender stratification in postindustrial America.

APPENDIX A. LIST OF MALLS (Washington, DC Metropolitan Area)*

Working-Class [A]	Middle-Class [B]	Upper-Middle- Class [C]
Greenbelt Plaza ³	Montgomery Mall	Georgetown
P.G. Plaza ^{1,3}	Pentagon City	Mall ^{1,2}
Wheaton Plaza ¹	Mall ¹	Mazza Gallerie
	White Flint Mall ¹	Mall ^{1,2}
		Tyson's Galleria ¹

*Classification is based on prior research by senior author (Manning 1995; Manning and Butera 1994).

¹ Accessible by D.C. Metropolitan Area subway system.

² Located in the city (District of Columbia).

³ Majority of customers are racial, ethnic, and national minorities.

APPENDIX B. MALL RESEARCH GUIDE

As participant observers, your research team is expected to conduct field work at a minimum of two (2) metropolitan area malls. You must chose one from Group A (working-class malls) and at

least one from either Group B (middle-class malls) or Group C (upper-middle-class malls). For the written report, compare and contrast your findings from the different malls. Explain how their physical similarities and differences are the result of contemporary social and economic forces. Remember, the shopping mall is a product of both "McDonaldization" and suburbanization trends of the U.S. postindustrial society. NOTE: if you do not have access to a car, you should select malls that are accessible by public transportation. Refer to the Mall handout.

CONDUCTING FIELD WORK AT THE MALL

1) What is the condition of the physical environment surrounding the mall? How would you describe the neighborhood from the standpoint of socioeconomic status? Is the location in the city, suburb, or more rural setting? What kinds of public transportation are available? What about parking problems? How would you describe the general area? Is it in a commercial/industrial area, residential, or somewhat isolated? How does the location of the mall relate to Jackson's discussion of transportation and spatial layout of suburbia? Explain.

2) How would you describe the layout of the mall? What department stores "anchor" each mall? What type of consumer do you think the mall is targeting? How does the mall encourage consumption versus leisure social activities? How does it attract women? Racial/ethnic minorities? Did you notice a difference in the ambiance of the malls? Were there different styles in physical structure and interior design? Was there an elevator, water fountain, chandelier, live plants, statues, artwork, marble or brass ornamental materials? Did you feel "different" in a particular mall? Why?

3) Based on your observations, how would you describe the clientele of each mall? Are there any discernible differences between the patrons of the different categories of malls? What time of day and days of the week did you conduct your field work? How much time did you spend to collect your data? In order to enhance the reliability of your information, plan your research excursion during the same time of the day (morning, afternoon, evening) and week (weekday, weekend). How does the

race/ethnicity of the mall employees mirror or differ from their customers? Is there a discernible class difference? Do you recognize a racial/ethnic/gender occupational hierarchy within the mall? Does it differ between malls? Did your race/ethnicity, gender, or social class affect your research? Why? If you had the opportunity to conduct your research again, what would you do differently? Why?

4) Are there any chain stores common to both malls? Can you find an identical "premium" retail item? Are the prices different? Did you note any differences in how customers are treated? How are shoppers versus "browsers" treated? Do customers tend to pay with cash, personal checks, bank credit cards, or store credit cards? Did you notice any "Lay-A-Way" options? Were there differences in marketing strategies? Were racial or ethnic groups specifically targeted? How? Were advertisements oriented toward women different than those oriented toward men? Did any stores offer limited financing "specials" such as low or interest-free credit? How many ATM machines did you see? How many commercial bank branches?

5) What is the primary function of the mall as measured by the activities of its patrons? Is it primarily for consumption, leisure activities, or a combination of both? How do these activities differ by race/ethnicity and by gender? To what extent does the mall satisfy these functions? Are there movie theaters (how many screens), full-service restaurants, night clubs, hotels, advertised social events (list types), or professional services (lawyers, doctors, accountants)? What stores or unexpected services did you find? Did you notice different standards of customer attention or cleanliness? How safe did you feel? Did you notice mall security? How did it differ from mall to mall? Did you see any youth gangs? If yes, what were their racial, ethnic, or national backgrounds?

6) Does the mall appear to be in good financial health? Are there any unoccupied spaces? How many? Why? Are there any "open-air" merchants or subcontractors inside the department stores? Did you notice a difference in the types of businesses operated by immigrants? women? Are there any

discount stores? Specialty stores? Prestige stores? What can you NOT buy at the mall? Are women shoppers treated differently than men? How? Why?

7) Is there any evidence of Weber's "irrationality of rationality"? What about the process of dehumanization? Are malls populated by "Zombies"? Do you agree or disagree with Ritzer?

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