

More on the middle class and framing

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I [posted recently](#) about how the rhetorical category “the middle class” seems to keep growing (even as the actual middle class is shrinking). Then I read [Jon Ronson’s article](#) in this month’s *GQ*. Ronson profiles six people—actually, five individuals and one family—who represent different spots on the U.S. income scale, giving a glimpse of “how to live on \$____ a week.”

It’s a solid premise, and Ronson approaches his subjects with empathy and a dose of righteous indignation. But I was startled by his methodology. He doesn’t look at someone from each of six income quantiles; nor does he start with someone in poverty and then add a given income amount for each subsequent subject.

Instead, each person makes five *times* more than the one before. So Ronson jumps from an impoverished dishwasher right to a two-income family of four making just over \$45k, and then to his own “about \$250,000, double that in a good year.” From there it’s three levels of stratosphere.

I get what Ronson’s trying to do here: climbing the narrative ladder by order of magnitude instead of by mere tens of thousands of dollars highlights the staggering gaps of inequality today. But it also allows him to position himself as part of the bottom half. Not that he spends his brief self-profile whining about how hard it is out there for a hundreds-of-thousands-aire; it’s clear that he’s aware he has things pretty good. But he frames himself—were he American, a member of the top 2 percent of American earners—as fourth richest out of six representative samples. And framing matters.

When Ronson talks to the woman above him on the pay scale, she allows that she enjoys the comforts of “having money,” but she doesn’t self-apply the word “rich.” She does, however, use the term “really rich” to refer to people who *aren’t* her. And in an indirect quote, Ronson suggests that the woman self-identifies as “top middle,” in contrast to the “superrich.” The woman makes \$1.25–3 million a year.

On the road between the \$45k family and the top-middle woman, Ronson offers this by way of transition: “I have never felt so rich and so fortunate as I do when I drive away from Urbandale that morning. But the feeling doesn't last.” In contrast, a couple of his subjects actually seem pretty content with their station. Still, Ronson's statement captures the stubbornly aspirational quality of U.S. class dynamics. It's not about having enough based on any fixed standard; it's about catching up with the people ahead of you.

That's why I'm convinced it's destructive to talk about people making a quarter million dollars as middle class. (That and [the whole tax thing](#).) To be middle class is, in the mythology of American opportunity, to not be rich yet. There's still more climbing to do—from the fourth of six groups to the third and on up.

But groups one through four are already so rarefied. The gap between the superrich and the regular rich may technically be part of the inequality story, but it's not the morally urgent part. That's back down at the lowest two of the six income levels Ronson looks at—back down where almost all Americans live.