

The Emerging Psychology of Social Class

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Abstract

The objective material conditions of our lives shape social perceptions and relationships in fundamental ways. In this essay, I survey research examining the influence of one's social class position in society on basic psychological processes—including conceptions of the self and relationships with others. Insights from this research indicate that relatively lower class individuals are characterized by *contextualized* selves—selves that are more intertwined with the social environment and other individuals—whereas relatively upper class individuals are characterized by *solip-sistic* selves—selves that are independent from the environment, and instead linked with internal goals, wishes, and motivations. Understanding these class-based differences in the social self—evidenced in social behavior, cognition, and emotion profiles—has the potential to inform interventions that reduce societal problems related to constrained social class mobility and rising economic inequality.

THE EMERGING PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL CLASS

When compared to many Western European countries, the United States has a brief history of social class, and it is this brevity that leads some scholars, politicians, or regular citizens to the conclusion that social class is not a meaningful social category in American social life—at least not in terms of influencing fundamental psychological processes. Over the last decade, however, there has been a significant upswing in the amount of psychology research on the topic of social class (for a review, see Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). This research suggests that one's material position in the human social hierarchy has a profound and lasting impact on the daily lives of individuals, their perceptions of the social world, and patterns relating to others. This essay explores this emerging psychology of social class.

Social class is defined by the material conditions of our lives and is typically measured in terms of one's annual income, educational attainment, and

occupation status (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). Together, these measures indicate an individual's level of access to social and economic resources. The first studies of social class in psychology research revolved around the influence of class on health outcomes: Perhaps the best example of these was an epidemiological study examining health patterns in thousands of British civil service workers. The study found that at every level of increase in occupational grade, workers showed improved health—across a wide array of health measures, including absences from work and even mortality (Marmot Whitehall II, 1991 Lancet). Several years later, a similar association between ascending levels of social class and reduced rates of mortality, by any cause, was observed in the United States (Adler *et al.*, 1994). These studies suggest that social class shapes the very length of the life course itself, and set the stage for research examining the fundamental ways in which available material and social resources change psychological processes in the social realm.

On this front, research from distinct laboratories converges on the realization that people from relatively lower class backgrounds are not damaged or maladaptive in comparison to their relatively upper class counterparts. Rather, people from lower levels of the social class hierarchy develop unique social selves that are specialized to handle the increased environmental demands placed on them by their reduced material and social resources (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). This social self is contrasted directly with the social self of relatively upper class individuals, which develops in environments of relatively abundant resources, where outcomes and opportunities are often within the control of individuals (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). As a result of these unique environmental demands, people from relatively lower class environments develop *contextualized* selves that are characterized by their vigilance and responsiveness to the external social environment and other individuals. In contrast, relatively upper class individuals develop *solipsistic* selves, characterized by their increased focus on internal traits, goals, and motives as well as a relative lack of awareness of environmental demands (Kraus *et al.*, 2012).

Importantly, research indicates that the social selves of upper and lower class individuals develop and are reinforced at early ages: Using both observations and interviews, Weininger and Lareau (2009) found that relatively lower class parents stressed that their young children should blend into their elementary school environments, whereas parents of relatively upper class children, in contrast, were more likely to stress the importance of children's independence from others. In this fashion, ways of handling unique class-based environments are passed from generation to generation (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

The contextualized selves of lower class individuals and the solipsistic selves of their upper class counterparts are expressed in social behavior studied in psychology laboratory settings. These selves are demonstrated in increases in threat vigilance displayed at descending levels of social class. In one study, lower class children watching ambiguous social scenarios, where a child was held after class, showed elevated heart rate and blood pressure, physiological reactions consistent with increased threat vigilance, relative to their upper class counterparts (Chen & Matthews, 2003). Among university students, lower class individuals experience threat in test-taking scenarios (Croizet & Claire, 1998) and feel both socially isolated and concerned about their academic competency relative to their upper class counterparts (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011).

In addition to threat vigilance, the contextualized selves of the lower class are expressed in the tendency for these individuals to be more accurate perceivers of others' emotions relative to upper class individuals. In one set of studies, relatively lower class university employees and undergraduates tended to be more accurate in judging others' emotions in static facial images and in live interactions in comparison to their upper class counterparts (Kraus, Cote, & Keltner, 2010). In close friendships between people of differing social class, upper class friends were unaware of the hostile emotions felt by their friend during a scripted interaction in which the friends were required to tease one another. In contrast, the lower class friends were accurate in perceiving all emotions during the teasing interaction, including hostile ones (Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011).

The solipsistic selves of upper class individuals are displayed in their tendency to behave in less prosocial ways relative to their lower class counterparts. By engaging in prosocial behavior, it is theorized that relatively lower class individuals strengthen social ties as a way to mitigate the demands of their potentially threatening social environments (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). Large-scale survey research bears out this pattern of prosocial behavior: Although higher income individuals give more to charity than lower income individuals in an absolute sense, when examining percentages of income donated, lower income individuals give more than their high-income counterparts (Independent Sector, 2002). This pattern is borne out in controlled laboratory experiments as well: In one study, people who perceived themselves as lower in social class relative to others tended to share more resources in a single trial dictator game, relative to their upper class counterparts (Piff *et al.*, 2010). In another example, lower class individuals reported experiencing elevated compassion and exhibited reduced heart rate—a physiological correlate of other orientation—after watching a video where children and their families were suffering through

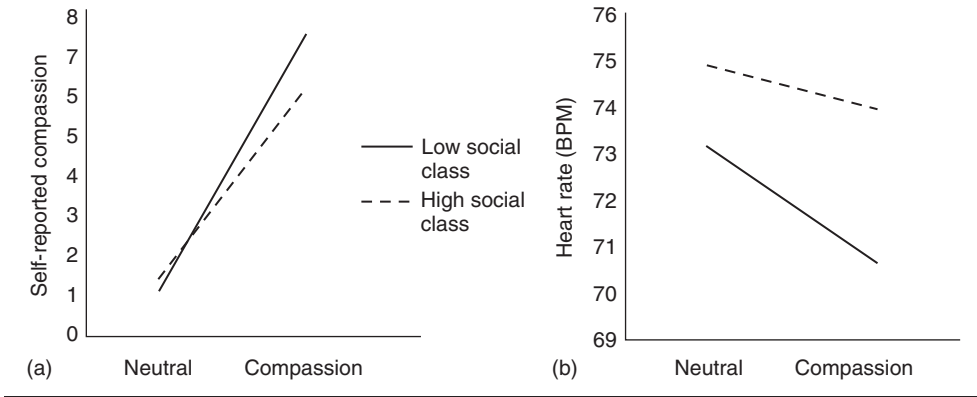


Figure 1 Self-reported compassion (a) and heart rate (b) as a function of emotion induction condition and social class. *Source:* Data reprinted from Stellar *et al.* (2012).

the diagnosis and treatment of cancer in comparison to upper class individuals. No self-report or physiological differences occurred while watching a neutral video providing instructions for building a brick wall (Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012; see Figure 1).

Much of the past decade has been spent examining the unique selves of upper and lower class individuals. This work has brought psychologists to a new understanding of the ways in which the material conditions of social life impact psychological processes. Although this research will move in several directions in the years to come, this essay focuses on the ways in which an emerging psychology of social class can help to solve social problems related to the formation and structure of economic hierarchy. In particular, the future of research on social class is likely to center around two fundamental issues related to societal structure: (i) How do we increase social class mobility in society? and (ii) How do we reduce economic inequality?

HOW DO WE INCREASE SOCIAL CLASS MOBILITY?

In comparison to much of the rest of the world, Americans tend to believe strongly in the possibility of social class mobility. This deeply held belief arises from the cultural history of the country, in which the promise of equal opportunity and the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental right of all Americans. However, reality differs markedly from these beliefs: The United States is faced with record levels of income inequality and one of the lowest rates of class mobility among industrialized nations (Burkhauser, Feng, Jenkins, & Larrimore, 2012; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Piketty & Saez, 2003). This lack of class mobility threatens to leave entire sectors of society out of valuable

social and employment opportunities and create large sectors of undereducated within the population. What can the emerging psychology of social class do to inform interventions that improve social class mobility in society? In this analysis, we focus on access to higher education, given that this is the primary means by which individuals ascend the social class hierarchy (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012).

Research on social class suggests that there are three potential sources of challenge for people from relatively lower class backgrounds who attempt to ascend the social class hierarchy. First, one direct consequence of having low amounts of economic resources is that resource scarcity reduces one's capacity to make cognitive decisions (Shah, Mullathainan, & Shafir, 2012). For instance, people in experiments who were made resource poor were more likely to borrow against their futures than people with abundant resources. In essence, having low amounts of resources made it more difficult for people to assess when borrowing was a bad idea (Shah *et al.*, 2012).

Second, people from differing social class backgrounds, as articulated above, have unique social selves that are socialized in the early environments where they develop. When relatively lower class individuals bring these social selves into contexts—like major colleges and universities—where relatively upper class selves are overrepresented among students, faculty, and administrators, they face additional challenges above and beyond the rigors of the classroom. More specifically, relatively lower class students must also learn new norms, values, and expectations for the self in order to feel that they fit in and belong within the University (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). In one longitudinal study demonstrating this process, the stated University norms of attending college to find oneself and be an independent thinker clashed with the norms held by first-generation college students, whose parents did not have 4-year degrees, who attended college as a way to foster social connections and be a part of a community (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the extent of this cultural mismatch was associated with lower grades among first-generation students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, *et al.*, 2012).

Third, social class differences between people are not invisible, but signaled and communicated in everyday social life (Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013). The communication of symbols of rank is generally beneficial for social living mammals because these signals help individuals manage expectations for their behavior—knowing who has resources or the capacity to punish is important to mitigate survival-related threats (Krebs, Davies, & Parr, 1993). Evidence suggests that social class signaling occurs with remarkable precision: For instance, watching 60 sec of strangers engaging in an interaction was enough for a sample of naïve observers to accurately guess where these strangers rank on the social class hierarchy (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

Follow-up work suggests that these perceptions of social class are also accurate based solely on profile photographs from Facebook.com (Kraus *et al.*, 2013).

One consequence of this accurate signaling of social class is that an individuals' lower social class—and by implication, their low status identity—is perceivable in interactions where one is being evaluated. Knowing that one's social class might leak out and be expressed in an evaluative context is likely to engender greater threat vigilance among lower class individuals, which is linked directly to reduced academic performance (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 2011). As well, if relatively lower class individuals chose to conceal their social class, there are likely to be direct costs for this behavior—concealing aspects of one's social identity is effortful and thus is associated with reduced work performance (e.g., Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996).

Although many intervention strategies currently exist to improve the performance of students from relatively lower class backgrounds, so that their access to educational opportunity and social class mobility is increased, these interventions usually do not take into account all three sources of challenge. For example, more and more high schools have adopted uniform policies and free lunch programs in schools, in part, to dampen signals of social class that divide lower and upper class students. These uniform policies have shown some modest benefits in academic performance among students from lower class backgrounds (Bodine, 2003), but these policies fail to address the cultural mismatch that relatively lower class students face at major colleges and universities. As well, programs such as Say Yes to Education (www.sayyestoeducation.org) provide free tuition and direct costs for attending college for lower class students, but these programs do not address the cultural mismatch that first-generation students face, or the threatening possibility of their lower class identity being perceived by others. Interventions that improve the educational opportunities for first-generation college students are likely to be effective only in as much as they manage students' financial burdens, unique cultural selves, and their capacity to signal their lower class identity to others.

HOW DO WE REDUCE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY?

The United States is facing record levels of economic inequality and these large-scale economic disparities between rich and poor place strain on all Americans (Kraus *et al.*, 2009; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Phillips, 2002): In years where economic inequality is heightened, Americans report lower life satisfaction and trust of fellow citizens in comparison to years where economic

inequality is lower (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011). As well, a review of studies examining health in societies that differ in economic inequality found that roughly 70% of studies suggested that societal health worsens as economic inequality deepens (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). It is clear from these data and others that economic inequality is bad for all members of society regardless of the position in the hierarchy. Moreover, few avenues exist for everyday Americans to combat these discouraging levels of economic disparity. How then, can the emerging psychology of social class inform interventions that could reduce economic inequality in society more broadly?

The emerging psychology of social class highlights challenges inherent in societal attempts to reduce economic inequality. Specifically, people at the top of the social class hierarchy are likely to justify and legitimize their privileged positions in society. These justification processes occur because acknowledging that privilege (i.e., elevated social class) was unfairly achieved threatens core beliefs about the self as good and the world as fair. Thus, individuals who perceive themselves as higher in rank in the social class hierarchy tend to endorse essentialist beliefs—beliefs that social class position is natural and biologically determined—relative to their lower ranking counterparts (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). That is, when faced with perceptions of the self as higher in social class than others, upper class individuals endorse beliefs that better genes are responsible for their elevated social positions.

Powerful members of the relatively upper class in society also engage in social behaviors that directly maintain economic inequality: In a study of members of the US House of Representatives, Republicans were uniformly likely to sponsor legislation (i.e., corporate tax havens) that maintains economic inequality. In contrast, as wealth increased among Democrats, the tendency to maintain economic inequality in society also increased (Kraus & Callaghan, 2014). Together, this research indicates the upper class individuals are likely to be particularly resistant to reductions in economic inequality in society.

Despite these significant challenges in the way of reducing economic inequality, several promising areas of future research suggest that some reduction in economic inequality is desired by all Americans. One example of this comes from a large survey of American attitudes toward the economic distribution of society: When asking Americans about the ideal distribution of wealth, all Americans regardless of wealth suggested that an ideal America would be more equal than the current one (Norton & Ariely, 2011). These results suggest that under certain conditions, all Americans, even upper class individuals, tend to support some reduction in economic inequality when asked specifically about the topic.

One promising area of economic inequality reduction lies in wealth redistribution through charitable donations. On this front, recall that higher income

individuals give a lower percentage of charitable donations annually relative to their lower income counterparts (Independent Sector, 2002). What interventions might lead higher income individuals to give more to charity than they do normally?

Reducing the solipsistic selves of upper class individuals by increasing their baseline, other orientation might be one means to increase prosocial behaviors and generosity. In one study examining this, a random sample of participants was assigned to watch a video depicting people in neutral emotional states whereas the other half of participants watched a video depicting intense suffering on the part of vulnerable individuals—the latter video was used to induce participants to be aware of the possibility that others sometimes face significant life challenges. After viewing one of these videos, participants interacted with a distressed experiment partner and then were asked to divide the remaining tasks between themselves and their partner. Lower income participants helped their partner more than higher income participants, by taking on longer experimental tasks, but only in the neutral video condition. When participants viewed the suffering video, high-income participants were equally helpful to their partner as their lower income counterparts (Piff *et al.*, 2010; see Figure 2).

There may be other interventions that enhance prosocial behavior and wealth redistribution among relatively upper class individuals, which will be uncovered in future research. For instance, the practice wherein extremely wealthy billionaires publically disclose their intention to donate a large proportion of their money to charity suggests that prosocial reputational concerns are important source of motivation for upper class individuals

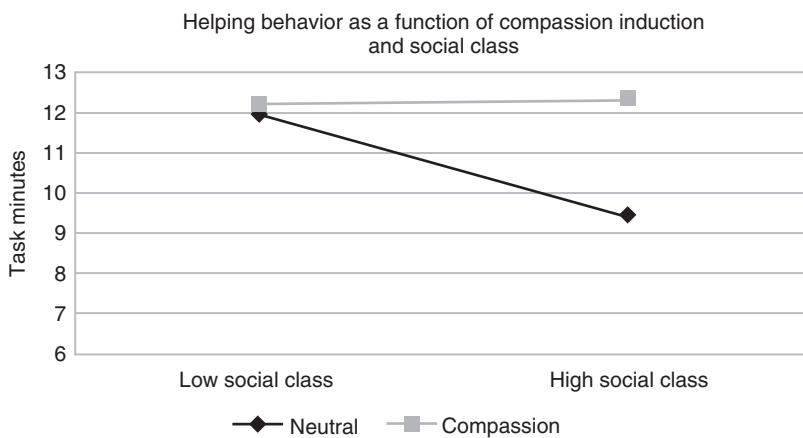


Figure 2 The relationship between emotion induction and social class on helping behavior measured in terms of the number of minutes helping a distressed experiment partner. *Source:* Data Reprinted from Piff *et al.* (2010).

(www.givingpledge.org). It is possible that the opportunity to earn a prosocial reputation would motivate enhanced prosocial behavior among upper class individuals, and future research should examine this possibility.

As psychologists continue to study social class, lay citizens and scholars alike will come to better understand the fundamental force that one's position in society exerts on the life course. The emerging psychology of social class promises several insights into understanding how our objective material reality can fundamentally shape subjective psychological perceptions of the social world. Importantly, this understanding of the psychological influence of social class has the capacity to inform our understanding of two disturbing trends in American social life: low levels of social class mobility and rising economic inequality. Together, class mobility and rising economic inequality are among the most pressing problems faced by Americans. The emerging psychology of social class offers several insights into navigating these challenges in the years that follow.

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Michael's work on social class has been published in top psychology journals such as *Psychological Science* and *Psychological Review*. It has also received media attention from the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Public Radio*, and the *New York Times*.

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