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Choice as an Act of Meaning: The Case of Social Class

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Social class is one important source of models of agency—normative guidelines for how to be a "good" person. Using *choice* as a prototypically agentic action, 5 studies test the hypotheses that models of agency prevalent in working-class (WK) contexts reflect a normative preference for similarity to others, whereas models prevalent in middle-class (MD) contexts reflect a preference for difference from others. Focusing on participants' choices, Studies 1 and 2 showed that participants from WK relative to MD contexts more often chose pens that appeared similar to, rather than different from, other pens in the choice set, and more often chose the same images as another participant. Examining participants' responses to others' choices, Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated that participants from WK relative to MD contexts liked their chosen pens more when a confederate chose similarly and responded more positively when a friend chose the same car in a hypothetical scenario. Finally, Study 5 found that car advertisements targeting WK rather than MD consumers more often emphasized connection to, rather than differentiation from, others, suggesting that models of agency are reflected in pervasive cultural products.

Keywords: social class, educational attainment, models of agency, choice, culture

The imperative to be unique is pervasive in mainstream American contexts. Camel cigarettes declares "Choose anything but ordinary"; the Harvard Business School advises "Break free. Start thinking and acting differently"; and Andersen Windows insists that their designs are not for everyone, "But then that's the whole point." The shared theme here is that the "good" way to act in the world is to seek *difference* from others and that individuals should use choice to differentiate themselves. Yet, what choice means and how it functions is not inherent in the act of choosing. Instead, choice, like all intentional behavior, is an act of meaning that necessarily derives its meanings from the sociocultural context in which it is realized (Bruner, 1990). Of the many sociocultural contexts that lend structure and meaning to American lives, those demarcated by *social class* are among the most significant. Because social class contexts differ substantially in their available resources and opportunities for action, we hypothesize that although choice is likely to signal difference in American middle-class (MD) contexts, it will take on different meanings in American working-class (WK) contexts.

How to Be a "Good" Person in WK and MD Contexts

Revealing the meanings of choice, or any intentional behavior, requires an analysis of the ideas, practices, and material features of the context. Why might different social class contexts promote different understandings of choice or, more broadly, normatively good action? We suggest here that action takes on divergent meanings in WK and MD contexts because these contexts provide people with substantially different resources and opportunities for action. Although the material conditions of the sociocultural context do not *determine* people's actions, they do *promote* certain kinds of actions and increase the likelihood that these actions will become normative and preferred (D. T. Miller, 2006; Sewell, 1992).

A growing literature in psychology, anthropology, and sociology reveals that social class contexts shape action in important ways (e.g., Kusserow, 1999; Lareau, 2003). People in WK relative to MD contexts tend to have fewer resources and choices and face greater risks and higher mortality rates. They also tend to spend more time interacting with family and participating in hands-on caregiving (Argyle, 1994; Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Lamont (2000) suggests that people in WK contexts are likely to be "tightly inserted in densely structured [. . .] social networks" (p. 155). Adaptive behavior in contexts characterized by these material and social conditions often requires acts of interdependence—such as attention to, reliance on, and adjustment to others. For example, parents in WK contexts are relatively more likely to stress to their children that "It's not just about you" and to emphasize that although it is important to be strong and to stand up for one's self, it is also essential to be aware of the needs of others and to adhere to socially accepted rules and standards for behavior (Kohn, 1969; P. J. Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). Considering the confluence of relatively fewer resources and opportunities for choice, more sustained contact with family, and a greater focus on others, we theorize that fitting in with and being similar to others will be relatively normative—common, and preferred—in WK contexts.

MD contexts, by contrast, tend to foster somewhat different understandings of normatively good action. People in MD contexts

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tend to have occupations that involve a high degree of individual autonomy, choice, and control (Browne, 2005). People in MD relative to WK contexts also tend to have more geographic mobility, higher incomes, better physical health, and more freely chosen nonfamily social relationships (Markus, Curhan, & Ryff, 2006; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Rossi, 2001). These material and social conditions tend to promote independence by fostering a greater social distance between people and a greater focus on the individual self (e.g., Lareau, 2003). For example, parents in MD contexts more often tell their children that "It's your world" and emphasize the value of promoting oneself and developing one's own interests (Kusserow, 1999; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). Considering the confluence of relatively more resources, fewer risks, a higher degree of self-focus, and a greater social distance among people, we theorize that being unique and different from others will be relatively normative—common and preferred—in MD contexts.

Engagement with these differing social class contexts produces differing models of agency: implicit understandings of how to be a normatively "good" person in the world, including how to relate to others (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 2003).[1] In our research, to examine how these models lend structure and meaning to behavior, we focus on choice as a prototypically agentic action. Although a given choice enacted in a WK or an MD context may seem identical to an observer, we suggest that choice—as a reflection of different underlying models of agency—takes on divergent meanings in these contexts. Without knowledge of these meanings, also referred to as the social ground of psychological life (Lewin, 1948), the substratum of essential assumptions for understanding sociocultural contexts (Moscovici, 1981), and the rules of the game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), even simple behavior becomes difficult to interpret (Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 2000).

Our theoretical perspective assumes that (a) the meanings of most actions derive from the models of agency prevalent in the contexts in which the actions occur and that (b) the significant sociocultural contexts of people's lives—delineated by gender, region of origin, race, ethnicity, religion, and, in this case, social class—shape these models by organizing specific scripts, schemas, and norms for action (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Norms for relationships, specifically, whether to seek similarity to or difference from others, are a central feature of models of agency and the focus of the present research. We theorize that (a) normative preferences for similarity to or difference from others reflect divergent models of agency and that (b) these preferences are part of a larger system of ideas and practices that are distributed both in individuals' behavior and in the material features of sociocultural contexts.

The Sociocultural Construction of Agency and Choice

Using classic social psychological paradigms, Snibbe and Markus (2005) provided initial evidence that models of agency vary by social class context. In a reactance study, they showed that MD participants liked their pen choices less when they were constrained by an experimenter, whereas WK participants did not change their liking for their pen choices. Moreover, in a dissonance study, they found that MD participants increased their rankings of a compact disc after choosing it, whereas WK participants did not show this effect (see also Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004). Given these responses, Snibbe and Markus (2005) inferred that MD and WK participants differed in their underlying models of agency. In this research, we use experimental paradigms designed to test specific hypotheses about how these models of agency differ in WK and MD contexts. The goal of the present research was to identify prevalent norms for relating to others in WK and MD contexts and, in particular, to reveal what normatively good choices mean in these contexts.

The notion that the meaning of choice varies by social class context builds on research showing that choice tends to signal independence from others in American MD contexts, whereas choice in East Asian contexts tends to reveal interdependence with others (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Markus, 1999). Although interdependence is common in both East Asian and American WK contexts, it has different sources, functions, and meanings in these contexts. Interdependence in East Asian contexts is part of the dominant discourse and is fostered by the mainstream practices and institutions of the larger society (e.g., Tsai, Miao, & Seppala, 2007), whereas interdependence in American WK contexts is afforded primarily by holding a relatively low status within the larger social hierarchy (see Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1995, 1998). As discussed earlier, the specific social and material conditions of WK contexts tend to promote interdependence by fostering a greater adjustment to, reliance on, and attention to others (cf. J. B. Miller, 1976). Moreover, when low status is coupled with a desire for upward mobility, climbing the social ladder of American society often requires fitting in with others and following socially accepted rules and standards for behavior (Kohn, 1969). Because independence is the dominant discourse in mainstream American society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Hochschild, 1995), the interdependence that is afforded by WK contexts is sometimes in tension with this prevailing discourse.

How College Shapes Normative Preferences

Level of educational attainment is a key factor that distinguishes WK from MD contexts (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1992). Students' experiences in college are organized by particular patterns of ideas and practices that both foster and reflect models of agency prevalent in MD contexts (see Jackman & Muha, 1984). Consequently, for students from MD backgrounds, college education tends to reinforce and elaborate ways of being that are already familiar. For students from WK backgrounds, however, college is often transformative, as it brings students into frequent contact with MD models of agency and often initiates a lifelong process of change. Because college plays such an important role in fostering and reinforcing cultural patterns associated with MD contexts (K. A. Miller, Kohn, & Schooler, 1986; Newcomb, 1943), level of educational attainment is widely considered to be a proxy for social class (Elo & Preston, 1996; Krieger & Fee, 1994; Liberatos, Link, & Kelsey, 1988; Smith et al., 1998)

[1] *Agency* is a broad term for the self in action (see Markus & Kitayama, 2003).

The Context-Contingent and Distributed Nature of Agency

Models of agency provide people with implicit descriptive and prescriptive guidelines for how to act as a normatively good person in the world (Fryberg & Markus, in press; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006; Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001; Shore, 1996). People tend to engage with many different sociocultural contexts throughout their lives, and in a given context, the prevalent models of agency need not shape people in the same ways (see Atran, Medin, & Ross, 2005; Sewell, 1992, for related discussion). Because people are both shaped by and shapers of the models of agency in the contexts they inhabit (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Shweder, 1990), models of agency are distributed in both individuals' behavior and material features of sociocultural contexts. As with most normative or cultural ideas, however, people are often not explicitly aware of the models of agency that lend structure and meaning to their behavior, and thus typically cannot identify their content (see D. T. Miller, 2006; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2004). As a result, explicit self-report measures of attitudes tend to be poor indicators of models of agency (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002; Kitayama, 2002; J. G. Miller, 2002; Peng, Nisbett, & Wong, 1997).

Specific Hypotheses

Given the close interplay between the material conditions and the meanings of normatively good action in WK and MD contexts, we predict that:

1. Models of agency prevalent in WK contexts will reflect a preference for similarity to and connection with others, and people who have engaged in WK contexts will be relatively more likely to make and prefer choices that produce similarity to others.
2. Models of agency prevalent in MD contexts will reflect a preference for individuation and differentiation from others, and people who have engaged in MD contexts will be relatively more likely to make and prefer choices that produce difference from others.

Multiple Methods of Assessing Models of Agency

Because people are often not aware of the implicit models that guide their behavior, in our studies we sought to indirectly reveal models of agency by using mostly behavioral methods. Though we included some direct measures of explicit attitudes, given that independence is the dominant and mainstream discourse in American society (Bellah et al., 1985; Hochschild, 1995; Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002), we do not expect these direct self-report measures of explicit attitudes to reflect the preference for being similar to and interdependent with others that we suggest is prevalent in WK contexts (see Heine et al., 2002; Kitayama, 2002; J. G. Miller, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Peng et al., 1997).[2]

If the hypothesized models of agency are indeed prevalent in WK and MD contexts, then they should be evident in the normative preferences implied by (a) participants' choices, (b) participants' responses to the choices of others, and (c) pervasive cultural products. In Studies 1 and 2, with a focus on individuals' choice behavior, we evaluate whether participants from WK and MD backgrounds make choices consistent with the hypothesized models of agency. In Studies 3 and 4, with a focus on the choices of others, we present participants with another person's choice—designed to reflect either WK or MD models of agency—and then assess their responses. In Study 5, with a focus on cultural products targeting consumers in WK and MD contexts, we analyze whether these products' messages reflect the hypothesized models of agency. The goal in this research was not to document the systematic variation in material conditions of WK and MD contexts, a task accomplished in other studies, but rather to reveal what choice means and how it functions in these contexts.

Study 1: Overview and Hypotheses

Study 1 focuses on the normative preferences implied by participants' choices. In a situation without a strong demand for a particular behavior, we asked participants to choose among pens that appeared relatively similar to or different from the other pens in the choice set.

Study 1 was designed to test whether participants from WK and MD backgrounds would exhibit different patterns of choice behavior. Our study mirrored the pen-choice paradigm used by Kim and Markus (1999), which showed that European Americans were more likely than East Asians to choose a minority pen rather than a majority pen, reflecting a preference for uniqueness. On the basis of these findings and our theory, we predict that participants from MD backgrounds will more often choose the minority pen, one that is relatively different from the alternatives, whereas participants from WK backgrounds will more often choose the majority pen, one that is relatively similar to the alternatives. Because participants are unlikely to be aware of the implicit models guiding their behavior, we do not expect participants' explicit self-reported attitudes about independence and interdependence to reflect the preferences implied by their choices.

Method

Participants. A diverse sample of 50 undergraduates participated in the study.[3] Participants were classified by prior engagement with WK and MD contexts: Those who had at least one parent with a 4-year college degree were considered MD and those who did not were considered WK.[4] Thirty-two participants were

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[2] Although traditional methods of assessing implicit attitudes might reveal these differences in normative understandings, our field experiments did not lend themselves to using these methods.

[3] Of participants classified as WK, 50% self-identified as Caucasian, 28% African American, and 22% Asian. Of participants classified as MD, 56% self-identified as Caucasian, 16% African American, 13% Asian, 3% Latino, 3% American Indian, and 9% "other."

[4] Parents' level of educational attainment is commonly used as a proxy for students' social class background for the following reasons: (a) The social class status of one's family of origin has a lasting effect on the social class identification of adults (Jackman & Jackman, 1983), (b) attaining a bachelor's of arts degree is important for finding a high-status professional job and gives one substantial advantages in lifetime earnings (Day & Newburger, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and (c) among the three commonly used indicators of social class status (education, income, and occupation), education is the best predictor of a wide range of beliefs (Davis, 1994) and is the most closely associated with lifestyle, behavior, and the psychological tendencies related to agency (Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Matthews, Kelsey, Meilahn, Kuller, & Wing, 1989).

categorized as MD (17 women and 15 men, mean age of 22.4), and 18 participants were categorized as WK (7 women and 11 men, mean age of 23.7). Participants from MD backgrounds reported higher family incomes than participants from WK backgrounds on an eight-level income scale (MD: $M = 5.7$, $SD = 1.7$; WK: $M = 4.1$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(45) = 3.42$, $p < .01$. Although our WK and MD participants were presently engaged in a similar educational context, their parents' educational backgrounds differed, making it highly likely that the participants had spent some of their lives in different social class contexts. Participants who presently share a context and differ only in their social class backgrounds provide a conservative test of our hypotheses: Such a sample allows us to control for factors such as age and immediate context and to more effectively isolate the effects of parental education.

Materials. We used pens as stimuli because previous research with pen-choice paradigms has revealed differences in models of agency (see Kim & Markus, 1999) and because it is likely that participants from WK and MD backgrounds ascribe equal value to them. We used green or orange pens that were otherwise identical and had previously been rated as equally attractive (Kim & Markus, 1999). After agreeing to take part in the study, participants completed a survey with demographic questions and two scales. First, we used an adaptation of Singelis's (1994) Self-Construal (SC) Scale, which comprises 12 items relevant to attitudes about independence and 13 items relevant to interdependence ($\alpha = .75$). Second, we used Cross, Bacon, and Morris's (2000) Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal (RISC) Scale, which comprises 11 items measuring participants' tendency to define themselves in terms of relationships ($\alpha = .86$).

Procedure. Consistent with Kim and Markus (1999), a research assistant who was blind to our hypothesis asked students on campus to complete a survey (the SC and the RISC). Once each participant completed the survey, the research assistant presented five pens and asked the participant to choose one as thanks for participation. To make the procedure seem natural, the research assistant would grab five pens from a bag without looking at them. We used a large bag of pens with both orange and green pens to indirectly indicate that both pen colors were plentiful. If the research assistant picked five pens of the same color, then he or she would replace one with a pen of the opposite color. All participants chose among five pens with one pen color in the majority (three or four pens) and one in the minority (one or two pens). After each participant chose, the research assistant recorded the pen choice and ratio of pens.

Results

Using a 2 (social class: WK or MD) × 2 (ratio: 1 to 4 or 2 to 3) × 2 (choice: majority or minority) log-linear test, we found a significant Social Class × Pen Choice interaction. Across both pen-proportion conditions, participants from WK contexts were more likely to choose a majority pen (72.2%) than participants from MD contexts (43.7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 3.86$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1). There was neither a three-way interaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 0.41$, *ns*, nor a Ratio × Choice interaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 0.21$, *ns*. We also used log-linear analyses to test the strength of the association between social class and pen choice when taking gender and race into account, and we found no significant effect for gender or race.

We also examined participants' responses to the SC and RISC scales, and as predicted, participants' responses on these explicit attitude measures diverged from the preferences implied by their choices. There were no significant correlations between participants' pen choices and scores on the SC or RISC scales. Moreover, participants from WK and MD contexts did not differ significantly on either the SC attitude or RISC attitude items.

Discussion

In Study 1, participants' choice behavior was consistent with the hypothesized models of agency. As predicted, participants from WK backgrounds more often chose a majority pen, suggesting a preference for similarity, whereas participants from MD backgrounds more often chose a minority pen, suggesting a preference for uniqueness and individuation. What is clear in this study is that the participants from WK backgrounds did not use choice to express uniqueness, but instead may have used choice to fit in with others. Perhaps participants from WK backgrounds were relatively less likely to choose a minority pen because they perceived it as scarce and as unavailable to future participants. If this were the

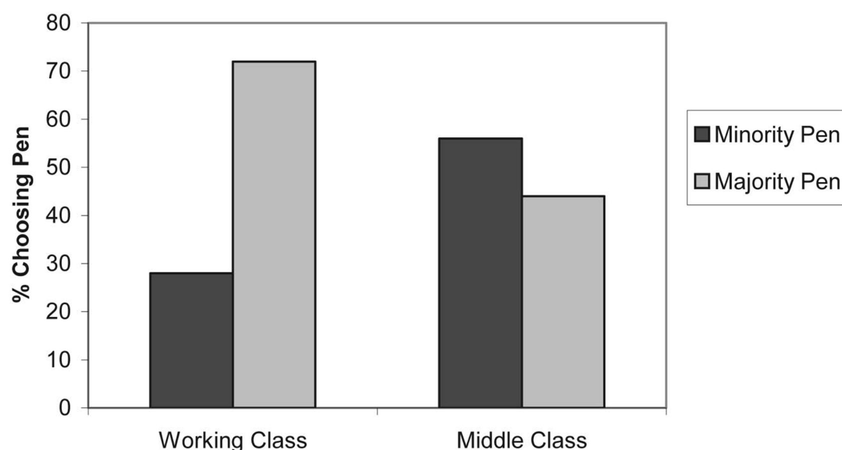

Figure 1. Percentage of participants who choose majority/minority pen by social class.

case, however, then participants from WK backgrounds should more often choose a minority pen in the 2-to-3 condition (when the minority pen was less scarce) than in the 1-to-4 condition (when the minority pen was more scarce). Pen ratio did not impact participants' choices, suggesting that scarcity is an unlikely explanation for our results.

As anticipated, participants' pen choices were not correlated with their self-construal scores, nor were there mean differences on these scales between participants from WK and MD backgrounds. This finding is consistent with our suggestion that people's self-reported explicit attitudes about interdependence and independence often diverge from the preferences implied by their actions (e.g., Kitayama, 2002; J. G. Miller, 2002).[5]

Study 2: Overview and Hypotheses

Study 2 again focuses on the normative preferences implied by participants' choice behavior and tests our hypotheses more directly. It also generalizes Study 1's findings to a different choice domain (visual images). Unlike Study 1, Study 2 exposes participants to the choices of an alleged previous participant and allows us to examine whether participants make choices that are the same as or different from those of the previous participant.

Each participant in this study made a series of choices among visual images after first being shown the choices of a previous participant. We predict that participants from WK relative to MD backgrounds will make more choices that are the same as those of the previous participant. In Study 1, using self-report attitude measures of independence and interdependence, participants' responses diverged from the preferences implied by their choices. In Study 2, we examined whether their explicit attitudes and behavior would still diverge if we included items that more directly related to participants' choices.

Method

Participants. A diverse sample of 107 female undergraduates participated in the study.[6] In response to an open-ended probe, 7 participants indicated some suspicion about the purpose of the study. These participants were therefore excluded from all further analyses. Because we had only female experimenters, we recruited women as participants. Matching experimenter and participant gender was important because this study required a significant social interaction between them. Using the method described earlier, we categorized 63 participants as MD (mean age of 21.3) and 37 participants as WK (mean age of 21.8). Participants from MD relative to WK backgrounds reported higher family incomes (when they last lived with their family) on an eight-level income scale, but this difference did not reach conventional levels of significance (MD: $M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.4$; WK: $M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.7$), $t(84) = 1.47$, *ns*. Participants from MD relative to WK backgrounds also reported higher perceived social class, $t(51) = 2.26$, $p < .05$.[7]

Materials. In this study, participants made a series of six choices. Because pens did not offer sufficient variety, we focused on a different choice domain: images of visual patterns from the Internet. To exhibit six rows of three images, we constructed a display board, labeled *Visual Preferences* at the top. All three of the images in a row had a similar style, but each image was also distinct from the others. After participants had chosen six images, they completed a survey with questions about their choices and demographics. Then, as a manipulation check, participants were asked to identify the previous participant's choices.

Image pretesting. The visual images were pretested to ensure that participants from WK and MD backgrounds liked them comparably well. On a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*), 79 female undergraduates rated how much they liked each image displayed in a set of three images. We excluded an entire image set if any single image in the set was liked differently by participants from WK and MD backgrounds.

Choice task pilot testing. To ensure that participants would attend to the previous participant's image choices, we designed a procedure in which the experimenter explicitly pointed them out to the participant. In pilot testing this procedure, we first explicitly pointed out the three images allegedly chosen by the previous participant and then asked participants to make three choices of their own. Before choosing, some participants were unwilling to look at the previous participant's choices because they said they did not want to be influenced by them. Moreover, upon debriefing, many participants mentioned that they did not make the same choices as the previous participant because they did not want their choices to be seen as conformity. In retrospect, this feedback was not surprising given that independence is the dominant and mainstream discourse in American society (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985).

We modified the procedure so that participants would attend to the previous participant's choices and have an opportunity to make choices that were relatively less likely to be seen as conformity. In this procedure, we added an additional three image choices to the task and explicitly drew participants' attention to only the first half of the previous participant's choices. The experimenter pointed out the first three (A, B, and C), but not the last three (D, E, and F), of the six total choices (see Figure 2). The latter three choice trials (the previous participant's choices that were not explicitly mentioned) are therefore the critical choice trials in this study.

Procedure. To expose each participant to the previous participant's choices, we placed six predefined choices in the right column of the display board. The previous participant did not actually exist, and each participant was exposed to the same configuration of images. After arranging the images, a White female experimenter, blind to students' social class background, invited female students to participate in an alleged marketing study on consumer preferences.

To explain to the participant why six image choices were visible, the experimenter would say that the last student just finished the study and that her choices were useful for explaining the procedure. The experimenter then explicitly pointed out the

[5] A growing body of research suggests that explicit, close-ended questionnaires focused on the self (e.g., measures of self-construal) may not capture attitudinal differences between cultural groups (Heine et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002; Peng et al., 1997).

[6] Of participants classified as WK, 87% self-identified as Caucasian, 3% Latino, and 11% "other." Of participants classified as MD, 91% self-identified as Caucasian and 10% "other."

[7] Levene's test for equality of variances revealed that the WK and MD sample variances were significantly different. Thus, we calculated the *t* statistics and degrees of freedom for the independent sample *t* tests assuming unequal variances in the two samples.

Figure 2. Visual image board displaying previous participant's choices. * = explicitly pointed out by experimenter; ** = not explicitly pointed out by experimenter.

first three, but not the last three, choices of the previous participant by saying "she chose *this* image in row A, *this* one in B, and *this* one in C."[8] The experimenter then removed the previous participant's choices so that they were no longer visible and asked participants to choose the images that they liked best. After participants completed the survey, the experimenter recorded their choices, asked them about the study's purpose, and subsequently debriefed them.

Results

As our primary dependent variable, we calculated the number of critical choice trials on which the participant's choice was the same as the previous participant's choice. We conducted all of the analyses with these sums, but we report the percentage of the critical choice trials that were the same as the previous participant's choices. Using an independent sample t test for the critical choice trials (D, E, and F), we found that participants from WK relative to MD contexts made more choices that were the same as those of the previous participant (see Figure 3), $t(63) = 3.53$, $p < .01$ (WK: $M = 49\%$; MD: $M = 30\%$). When the previous participant's choices were explicitly pointed out, however, there was no difference between groups, $t(98) = 0.65$, *ns*. To assess the influence of participants' racial or ethnic background, we analyzed the data excluding participants self-identified as non-White and found the same results, $t(52) = 3.61$, $p < .01$ (WK: $M = 50\%$; MD: $M = 29\%$).

Our manipulation check confirmed that participants attended to the choices of the previous participant. Overall, participants remembered 73.4% of the previous participant's choices, and the number of images correctly identified did not differ by social class background, $t(93) = 0.24$, *ns*. Moreover, participants from WK and MD contexts did not differ in their memory for the first three choices, $t(94) = 0.65$, *ns*, or the last three choices, $t(94) = 0.39$, *ns*. A one-sample t test revealed that participants from both groups remembered more of the first three images ($M = 82\%$) than the last three ($M = 65\%$), $t(96) = 4.87$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the experimenter effectively drew participants' attention to the first three images.

Furthermore, as anticipated, participants' explicit attitudes—even when they directly related to their choices—did not reflect the preferences implied by their choices. Although participants from WK relative to MD contexts made more choices that were the same as the previous participant's choices, participants from the two groups had comparable perceptions of their choices. When asked to rate on separate 10-point Likert scales "How much do you think that your choices would be [different from/similar to] the choices of other college students," participants from WK and MD contexts did not significantly differ in their agreement with the difference item, $t(97) = 0.26$, *ns*, or the similarity item, $t(98) = 0.44$, *ns*.

Discussion

Study 2 generalizes the findings of Study 1 to a different choice domain and provides more direct support for our hypotheses. As predicted, among the critical choice trials, participants from WK relative to MD backgrounds made more choices that were the same as those of the previous participant. When the previous participant's choices were not explicitly pointed out and there was not a strong situational demand for a particular behavior, participants from WK and MD backgrounds made choices that reflected the hypothesized models of agency. Yet, as anticipated, when the previous participant's choices were explicitly pointed out and participants' choices could easily be seen as conformity, there was no difference between the two groups.

Furthermore, the mismatch between participants' explicit attitudes about making similar or different choices and their actions is consistent with our suggestion that people are often unaware of the models of agency that guide their behavior (D. T. Miller, 2006; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2004). This finding is also consistent with a large body of social psychology research, which has documented a lack of correspondence between explicit attitudes and behavior (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; LaPiere, 1934; Wicker, 1969).

Study 3: Overview and Hypotheses

In Studies 1 and 2, participants' choices reflected the hypothesized normative preferences for similarity and difference. If, as hypothesized, these models of agency are widely distributed in WK and MD contexts, then these preferences should be evident not only in participants' choices but also in their responses to the choices of others. Therefore, in Study 3, we present participants

[8] The experimenter referred to the previous participant as a woman to make salient her status as an in-group member.

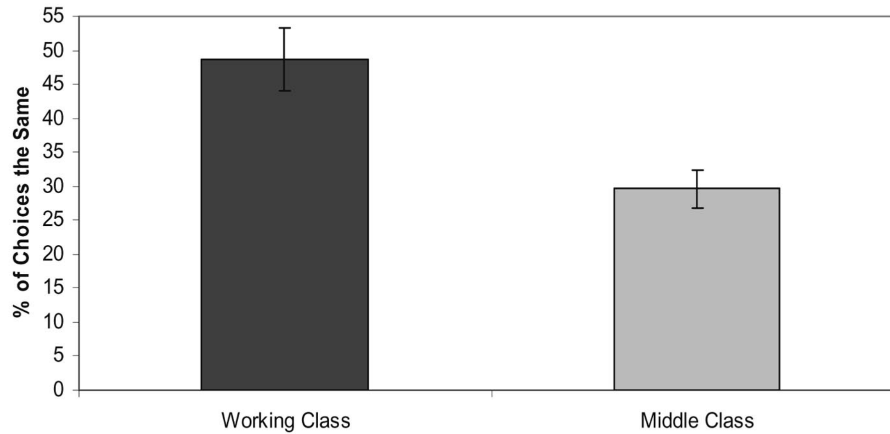

Figure 3. Percentage of same choices made among critical choice trials by social class.

with a social situation in which another student makes a choice that is either the same as or different from their own choice and then assess their responses.

In Study 3, we used participants' ratings of their own choices to gauge their responses to another person's choice. In particular, using pens as choice stimuli, we evaluated whether participants from WK and MD backgrounds would like their chosen pens more when a confederate subsequently chose either the same pen (similar condition) or a different pen (different condition). If models of agency that promote similarity to others are widely distributed in WK contexts, and models of agency that promote difference from others are widely distributed in MD contexts, then participants' responses to others' choices should reflect these divergent normative preferences. Accordingly, we hypothesized that participants from WK backgrounds would like their pen choices more in the similar, rather than in the different, condition and that participants from MD backgrounds would like their pen choices more in the different, rather than in the similar, condition.

Method

Participants. To increase the likelihood that the participant would view the confederate as an in-group member, we matched participants and confederates by their gender and ethnicity. Because the male and female confederates were White, our sample included 86 White participants. Using the same procedure as in Study 1, 29 participants were classified as WK (16 women and 13 men, with a mean age of 21.5), and 57 participants were classified as MD (30 women and 27 men, with a mean age of 22.1). Students from MD backgrounds reported higher family incomes (when they last lived with their family) than students from WK backgrounds on an eight-level income scale (MD: $M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.2$; WK: $M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.4$), $t(80) = 3.40$, $p < .01$.

Materials. The five pens used for this study were metal twist pens that clearly differed in their primary aesthetic features. The survey administered at the end of the study included questions about participants' pen choices and demographics. We assessed participants' pen-liking, the primary dependent measure, with four items on 10-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (*dislike it a lot*) to 10 (*like it very much*): "Overall how much do you like the pen that you chose?"; "How much do you like the design of the pen?"; "How much do you like the pen's ink?"; and "How well does the pen write?" (see Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Pen pretesting. The pens were pretested to ensure that participants from WK and MD backgrounds liked them equally. Fifty-one students rated each of the five pens on a scale ranging from 1 (*I don't like it at all*) to 10 (*I like it a lot*). On average, the five pens were liked comparably well ($M = 5.45$; range = 4.58–6.34). Independent sample t tests confirmed that students from WK and MD backgrounds did not differ in their liking for each of the five pens.

Procedure. A White female experimenter invited students to participate in an alleged marketing project. While holding a pen-display board with five pens, the experimenter explained to the student that he or she would first choose a pen and then receive it as a gift after completing a survey. Once the participant had chosen a pen and had received that pen from the experimenter, a gender-matched confederate would approach him or her and politely interrupt by saying, "Excuse me, could I have a pen too?"[9] With the same procedure as before, the experimenter then asked the confederate to choose a pen. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. While pointing to a specific pen choice, the confederate said either "I would like a pen like his/hers" (similar condition) or "I would like a pen like that" (different condition). In the similar condition, the confederate chose the same pen as the participant, and in the different condition, a different pen was chosen.[10] After the confederate indicated a pen choice, the experimenter gave the pen to the confederate in the participant's line of sight and gave each of them a survey. Once the participant completed the survey, the experimenter asked follow-up questions, including a probe for suspicion about the confederate. Upon de-

[9] To lead participants to perceive the confederate similarly, confederates wore a shirt with the name of the participants' university, making salient the confederate's status as an in-group member.

[10] To randomize the different possible choice combinations made by the participant and confederate, each pen was assigned a number, and the confederate chose between the remaining four different pens in a fixed order. If the participant chose the pen that was supposed to be chosen next, then the confederate simply skipped to the next pen.

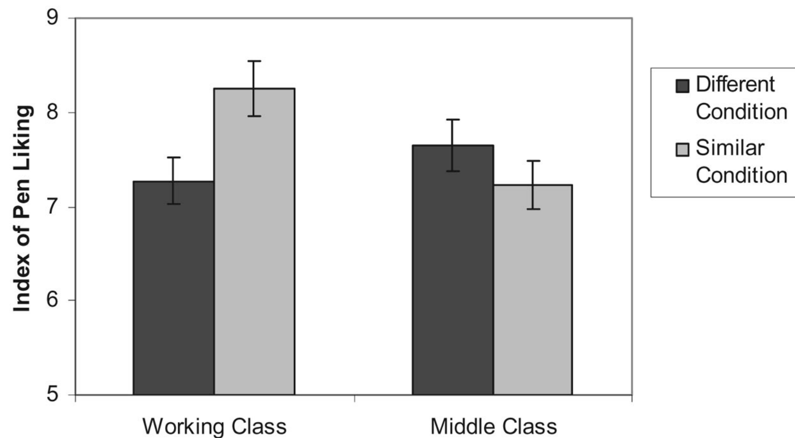

Figure 4. Mean pen evaluations by social class and condition.

briefing, most participants reacted with disbelief, and none reported awareness that the other person was a confederate.

Results

Because all four pen-liking measures (global, design, ink, writing) were intercorrelated (range of *r*s: .32–.76; all *p*s $< .01$), we collapsed them into an index of pen-liking ($\alpha = .81$) by calculating the average of the four measures. As predicted, a significant Social Class (WK or MD) × Condition (similar or different) interaction emerged, $F(1, 82) = 5.70$, $p < .05$. Planned contrasts revealed differences all in the predicted direction, two of which attained significance. As shown in Figure 4, as predicted, participants from WK contexts in the similar condition liked their pens significantly more ($M = 8.3$) than participants from WK contexts in the different condition ($M = 7.3$), $t(82) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, and participants from MD contexts in the similar condition ($M = 7.2$), $t(82) = 2.43$, $p < .05$. Participants from MD contexts in the different condition ($M = 7.7$), however, did not like their pens significantly more than participants from MD contexts in the similar condition ($M = 7.2$), $t(82) = 1.25$, *ns*, or participants from WK contexts in the different condition ($M = 7.3$), $t(82) = 0.93$, *ns*. Independent sample *t* tests confirmed that participants from WK and MD contexts did not significantly differ in their perceived similarity to, $t(82) = 0.63$, *ns*, or liking for the confederate, $t(82) = 0.50$, *ns*.

Discussion

In Studies 1 and 2, the choices of participants from WK backgrounds reflected a preference for similarity to others, whereas the choices of participants from MD backgrounds reflected a preference for differentiation from others. In this study, we used different methods focusing on participants' responses to the choices of others. As hypothesized, participants from WK backgrounds liked their pen choices more when the confederate made the same choice, rather than a different choice, suggesting that similarity to others is relatively preferred in WK contexts. This was not the case, however, for participants from MD backgrounds: Their pen ratings were not significantly influenced by the confederate's pen choice, though the difference between the two conditions was in the predicted direction. If, as we hypothesize, models of agency prevalent in MD contexts promote individuation from others, then participants from MD contexts may have been less attuned to others in their surroundings and therefore less affected by the confederate's choice. Social class differences in levels of social responsiveness may partially account for the null findings for this group (see Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, in press), but further research is needed to address this possibility.

Study 4a: Overview and Hypotheses

Study 3 revealed that participants from WK backgrounds liked their chosen pens more when a confederate made the same choice. In Study 4a, we aimed to extend these findings to a different consumer product and to generalize our results to an adult sample. Focusing again on participants' responses to the choices of others, we present participants with a hypothetical social scenario in which a friend chooses the same car as they do and then assess their responses.

We used a convenience sample of adults drawn from two different social class occupational contexts: firefighting and business school. People in these contexts differ in their educational backgrounds and in how much choice and control they have in the work that they do.[11] Firefighting is an occupation that exemplifies common characteristics of WK occupational contexts: A large proportion of the job requires following well-defined rules and performing scripted, routine tasks (Browne, 2005; Kohn, 1969). To sample people from an MD context that differed sharply on these dimensions from firefighting contexts, we chose master's students in business administration (MBAs) who had years of business experience prior to graduate school. MBAs tend to have professional careers that are self-directed, dynamic, and substantively complex.

We designed Study 4a to examine how participants in WK and MD contexts would respond to a friend knowingly purchasing the

[11] This difference is particularly important because occupational self-directedness is thought to play a causal role in reinforcing and fostering psychological differences associated with social class groups in the United States (Kohn & Schoenbach, 1983; Kohn & Schooler, 1983).

Table 1
Percentage of Firefighter and MBA Interviews Coded in Each Category

Coding category and definition	Example	% firefighter interviews	% MBA interviews	$\chi^2(1, N = 62)$
	Positive or neutral response			
1. Positive first response: initial reaction is positive	"I'd feel good about it." "Fantastic, he gets a great car."	86.7	53.1	8.20**
2. Feel happy: express positive emotion	"I would be delighted." "I would be happy for him."	33.3	12.5	3.84*
3. Not bothered: no effect or impact	"I wouldn't have a problem with that." "It wouldn't bother me."	76.7	25.0	16.53***
	Negative response			
1. Negative first response: initial reaction is negative	"I would feel somehow betrayed." "I would feel slightly irritated."	13.3	46.9	8.20**
2. Feel unhappy: express negative emotion	"I'd probably be upset." "I might be disappointed."	3.3	46.9	15.33***
3. Less unique: car is less unique	"My car's not as unique." "It spoils my differentiation."	6.7	37.5	8.42**
	Mixed response			
1. Ambivalent response: contains positive and negative responses	"In some way flattered, but annoyed." "I'd have a combination of feelings."	10.0	37.5	6.39*
2. Depends on situation: qualifies response	"It depends on the friend." "If they did it [. . .] in response to my purchase, I'd be irritated."	16.7	40.6	4.31*

Note. MBA = master of business administration.
$^{*} p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$. $^{***} p < .001$.

same car as they had just bought.[12] We focused on car choice because we sought to generalize Study 3's findings to a more consequential choice domain.

If, as we hypothesize, a friend's choice of the same car reflects the models of agency prevalent in WK contexts and diverges from the models of agency prevalent in MD contexts, then (a) people in WK contexts should be more likely to respond positively to the friend's choice and perceive it as affirming their choice as an act of connection to others and (b) people in MD contexts should be more likely to respond negatively to the friend's choice and perceive it as undermining their choice as an act of differentiation from others.

Method

Participants. The sample classified as WK consisted of 30 diverse adults who were firefighters employed at one city's fire department (28 men and 2 women, with a mean age of 35.8), whereas the sample classified as MD comprised 32 diverse adults who were graduate students at a business school (30 men and 2 women, with a mean age of 30.5).[13] On a categorical scale ranging from 1 (*some high school or less*) to 7 (*graduate level degree*), on average the firefighters had obtained a 2-year associate's degree ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 1.2$), whereas the MBAs had obtained a 4-year bachelor's degree ($M = 6.4$, $SD = 0.5$), $t(39) = 8.69$, $p < .001$. On a four-level scale with income in increments of $25,000, MBAs reported higher household incomes ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$) than firefighters ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.9$), $t(60) = 3.60$, $p < .01$.

Procedure. A White female interviewer asked participants to imagine buying a new car, showing it to a friend, and finding out the next day that the friend purchased the same car. Participants were then asked, "How would you feel after you found out that your friend purchased the same car as you?" By describing a specific situation and allowing participants to respond in their own words, we sought to reveal participants' normative preferences for how to relate to others.

Coding. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. We developed a thematic coding scheme on the basis of our hypotheses and a review of a small subset of interview responses (see Table 1 for coding categories and examples). We coded the interviews using two different methods. First, we coded each statement according to its valence. Using mutually exclusive codes, each respondent's initial reaction to the scenario was coded as either positive or negative. For example, "Awesome, let's start a car club!" was coded as a *positive first response*, whereas "I'd

[12] In this study, we focused on similarity for two reasons: (a) Participants could not respond to a hypothetical situation involving a choice of a different car without defining a specific car for them to consider and (b) much prior research has examined MD European Americans' desire to be unique, different, and independent from others (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Markus, 1999).

[13] Of participants classified as WK, 53% self-identified as Caucasian, 37% African American, and 10% Latino. Of participants classified as MD, 78% self-identified as Caucasian, 13% African American, and 9% Latino.

feel betrayed" was coded as a *negative first response*. Second, we coded each statement according to its thematic content. To capture the breadth of themes in each interview, these codes were not rendered mutually exclusive. For example, the statement "I would be disappointed that my car is generic" would be categorized as both *feel unhappy* and *less unique*. Both sets of codes were grouped into three response categories: (a) positive or neutral, (b) negative, and (c) mixed.

Interrater reliability. Two carefully trained undergraduate research assistants blind to the hypotheses coded approximately 20% of the interview material to establish preliminary reliability. After coding all of the material, the average Cohen's kappa was .84 (range = .68–1.00), revealing that the agreement between coders was substantial (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Results

As predicted, firefighters more often provided positive or neutral responses when asked how they would feel about their friend's purchase of the same car, whereas MBAs more often provided negative or mixed responses (see Table 1). The firefighters gave a *positive first response* significantly more often than the MBAs and more frequently reported that they would *feel happy* or *not bothered*. By contrast, the MBAs reported that they would *feel unhappy* and that this situation would make them feel *less unique* significantly more often than the firefighters. The MBAs were also significantly more likely to report *ambivalent* feelings and to say that their response would *depend on the situation*.

Log-linear analyses were used to test the association between social class and the occurrence of each coding category when taking race into account. A significant Race (White or non-White) × Social Class (WK or MD) interaction emerged for only the *ambivalent* code. Although the MBAs were more likely than the firefighters to report that they would feel ambivalent, this effect was only significant among participants who self-identified as non-White.

Discussion

In Study 4a, when presented with a social scenario involving a friend's choice of the same car, the responses of firefighters and MBAs reflected divergent normative understandings of choice. For example, revealing a preference for fitting in with and connecting to others, one firefighter said "I'd be glad for him because if I have something, I want everybody to have that." By contrast, in response to the same social scenario, revealing a preference for being unique and standing out from others, one MBA said "I'd be disappointed because I wanted to be unique [. . .] it spoils my point of differentiation from everyone else." Consistent with the hypothesized models of agency, the firefighters were more likely to interpret a friend's choice of the same car as a form of connection between friends, whereas the MBAs were more likely to interpret the "same" choice as a threat to their uniqueness.

Study 4b: Overview and Hypotheses

To ensure that Study 4a's findings were not a product of the particular social class occupational contexts from which we drew our participants (firefighting and business school), we replicated the study in a survey format with college students. We predict that participants' responses will mirror the pattern of responses found in Study 4a.

Method

Participants. Our participants were 884 diverse undergraduates.[14] Using our standard method, 243 students were considered WK (91 men and 152 women, with a mean age of 19.6), and 641 students were considered MD (245 men and 396 women, with a mean age of 18.9). Participants from MD backgrounds reported higher family incomes (when they last lived with their family) than participants from WK backgrounds on an eight-level scale of income (MD: $M = 6.5$, $SD = 1.5$; WK: $M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.8$), $t(334) = 10.67$, $p < .001$, and higher perceived social class, $t(865) = 10.57$, $p < .001$.

Procedure. In a mass survey testing session, students were asked to read the same hypothetical scenario involving a friend's choice of the same car and to imagine how they would respond (see Study 4a). Distinct from Study 4a, we provided participants in Study 4b with sets of response alternatives. We constructed these alternatives on the basis of the common responses to this scenario in Study 4a. Participants were presented with three sets of two response alternatives and asked to choose the one from each row that best represented how they would respond. Participants were asked whether they would feel (a) "good because I feel close to my friend" or "bad because I feel too close to my friend"; (b) "good because my car is special" or "bad because my car is less unique"; and (c) "good because people like my car" or "bad because too many people like my car." One response in each set was designed to reflect the models of agency hypothesized to be prevalent in WK contexts, and the other was designed to reflect the models of agency hypothesized to be prevalent in MD contexts.

Results

For two of the three sets of response alternatives, we found the predicted results. In response to a friend purchasing the same car as they had, participants from WK contexts more frequently endorsed a response that said they would feel "good because I feel close to my friend," whereas participants from MD contexts more frequently endorsed a response that said they would feel "bad because I feel too close to my friend," $\chi^2(1, N = 778) = 3.86$, $p < .05$. Participants from WK contexts also more frequently endorsed a response that said they would feel "good because my car is special," whereas participants from MD contexts more often endorsed a response that said they would feel "bad because my car is less unique," $\chi^2(1, N = 801) = 5.51$, $p < .05$. Participants' responses to the item asking whether they would feel "good because people like my car" or "bad because too many people like my car" did not differ between groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 776) = 0.00$, *ns*. We used log-linear analyses to test the effects of social class and race on participants' responses and found no significant effect of race.

[14] Of participants classified as WK, 56% self-identified as Caucasian, 5% African American, 5% Asian, 5% Native American, 22% Latino, and 7% "other." Of participants classified as MD, 80% self-identified as Caucasian, 3% African American, 6% Asian, 6% Latino, and 7% "other."

Discussion

By replicating Study 4a with a sample of undergraduates, we provide additional evidence for the hypothesized models of agency. As predicted, on two of three dependent measures, participants from WK backgrounds more often responded positively to a scenario involving a friend's choice of the same car, whereas participants from MD backgrounds more often responded negatively. One of the measures, however, that asked whether participants would feel "good because people like my car" or "bad because too many people like my car" did not differ between groups. This null finding might have occurred because the responses in this set of alternatives were not sufficiently distinct from each other. The results of the other two measures, however, support our hypotheses and indicate that Study 4a's results were not a product of the particular occupational contexts from which we drew our sample.

Study 5: Overview and Hypotheses

In Studies 1 through 4, participants from WK and MD backgrounds made different choices and responded differently to other people's choices. Models of agency are reflected not only in individual behavior but also in the sociocultural contexts with which people engage. Therefore, in Study 5, we examined whether the content of pervasive cultural products—in this case, magazine advertisements for cars—would reflect the hypothesized models of agency. A study of magazine ads is well suited for examining the meanings of choice because ads are designed to persuade a target group to choose a particular product. Because marketers design ads to appeal to the preferences of the target consumers (Zhang & Gelb, 1996), ads are embedded with culturally specific meanings (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001) and can be useful for revealing the meaningful messages prevalent in different sociocultural contexts (Gregory & Munch, 1997; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Kim & Markus, 1999). Given that cultural products both reflect and perpetuate the ideas and practices prevalent in a sociocultural context, they are one mechanism through which context-specific preferences are maintained (see Sewell, 1992). In the present research, we analyzed magazine ads to answer a question that has not been previously explored—whether ads targeting people in WK and MD contexts reflect different messages about what is normative and preferred.

If the hypothesized models of agency are prevalent in WK and MD contexts, then they should be evident in magazine ads targeting consumers in these contexts. To probe for evidence of these models, we compared the content and themes of messages found in magazine ads for the cars that people in WK and MD contexts typically purchase. As discussed earlier, given that ideas related to interdependence are often in tension with mainstream American society's prevailing discourse of independence, we anticipate that ads targeting consumers in WK contexts will not be more likely to provide direct messages urging people to conform or to be similar to others, but instead will be more likely to indirectly emphasize the importance of attending to and relating to others. Specifically, we expect these ads to include more themes related to relationships (e.g., family and friends) and connecting to others and to include more people. Conversely, we predict that ads targeting consumers in MD relative to WK contexts will more frequently emphasize the importance of differentiation. Thus, we expect these ads to contain more themes related to uniqueness or breaking the rules and to include fewer people.

Method

Procedure. To identify magazines with car ads, we surveyed a broad array of U.S. magazines and selected those with at least one car ad. A total of 37 magazines,[15] with 156 distinct car ads with 27 different car makes, were included in the sample. Our analysis included each distinct, full-page ad in these magazines between January and March 2005. To categorize the ads according to the educational attainment of car buyers, we used data from the Simmons, 2001 National Consumer Survey, a marketing survey of adults from over 30,000 U.S. households. If 50% or more of a car's buyers had a 4-year degree, then the ads for that car were classified as MD (n = 36 ads); otherwise, the ads were classified as WK (n = 120 ads). Finally, we coded and analyzed the thematic content of the WK and MD ads.

Advertisement distribution. The majority (77%) of ads targeted consumers engaged in WK contexts, as would be expected given that the majority (74%) of U.S. adults do not have a 4-year college degree (Day & Newburger, 2002). To guarantee an equitable representation of ads targeting both groups, we weighted the WK and MD ads equally in our analysis, as if each constituted half the sample.

Coding. After reviewing the findings of previous research and a small subset of ads, we developed a thematic coding scheme to test our hypotheses (see Table 2 for coding categories and examples). Most codes aimed to capture the themes in the ads' text, but other codes focused on the visual images in the ads. The codes were grouped into two hypothesis-driven categories: (a) connecting to others and (b) differentiating from others. The codes were not mutually exclusive: A single ad could be assigned multiple codes. For example, if an ad contained people in the image and displayed the text "Carries all sorts of odd things. Like your friends," this ad would be counted as *people present* and *relationships*.

Interrater reliability. Two carefully trained undergraduate research assistants blind to the hypotheses coded approximately 20% of the ads to establish preliminary reliability. After coding all of the ads, the average Cohen's kappa was .76 (range = .48–.95).

Results

As shown in Table 2, the results supported most of our predictions. The WK ads were significantly more likely than the MD ads to mention *relationships* and *connection* and to contain images with people, whereas the MD ads were significantly more likely than the WK ads to contain messages of *extreme uniqueness* and marginally more likely to include messages of *subtle uniqueness*.

[15] We analyzed car ads from the following 37 magazines: *Allure*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Automobile*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Bon Appetit*, *Breathe*, *Business Week*, *Car*, *Country Home*, *Food & Wine*, *Fortune*, *Glamour*, *Good Housekeeping*, *GQ*, *Men's Health*, *Money*, *Motor Trend*, *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, *Real Simple*, *Road Test*, *Road & Track*, *Rollingstone*, *Runner's World*, *Saveur*, *Self*, *Shape*, *Southern Living*, *Sports Compact Car*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Economist*, *Time*, *Town & Country*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Wired.*

Table 2
Percentage of WK and MD Magazine Ads Coded in Each Category

Coding category and definition	Example	% WK ads	% MD ads	$\chi^2(1, N = 156)$
Connecting to others				
1. People present: includes people in image	Visual image contains people	25.0	2.8	16.86^{***}
2. Relationships: text mentions friends, family, or home	"Take family time further." "Dropping the kid off at college."	9.2	0.0	7.33^{**}
3. Connection: text mentions connecting or combining	"Combines the things you love." "When two great things come together."	8.3	0.0	7.23^{**}
Differentiating from others				
1. Subtle uniqueness: text describes car as different or unique	"List of features unique." "See the difference."	14.2	25.0	$3.12^{\dagger}$
2. Extreme uniqueness: text mentions uniqueness in absolute terms	"No two will ever be the same." "Only one of its kind in the world."	3.3	16.7	6.96^{**}
3. Break the rules/rebel: text mentions deviating from norm	"Outrun the fashion police." "Street legal. Pretty much."	10.0	11.1	*ns*

Note. WK = working class; MD = middle class.
$^{\dagger} p < .10$. $^{**} p < .01$. $^{***} p < .001$.

Discussion

The meanings of normatively good action are shaped in part by the messages prevalent in the sociocultural contexts with which people engage. As predicted, we found that ads targeting consumers in WK contexts more often depicted people, mentioned relationships, and included messages about connecting to others, themes that we suggest promote interdependence, whereas ads targeting consumers in MD contexts more often included messages about differentiating from others. These findings illustrate that the differing normative preferences revealed in participants' choices and responses to others' choices (see Studies 1–4) are also reflected in pervasive cultural products targeting consumers in these contexts. When models of agency are represented both in individual behavior and in cultural products, they become self-perpetuating as people both create and engage with their contexts.

General Discussion

Overview

In a book entitled "Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams," first-generation college graduate and journalist Alfred Lubrano describes the role of social class in shaping culture:

> Class is a script, map, and guide. It tells us how to talk, how to dress [. . .] and how to socialize. It affects whom we marry; where we live; the friends we choose; the jobs we have; the vacations we take; the books we read; the movies we see; the restaurants we pick; how we decide to buy houses, carpets, furniture and cars; where our kids are educated; what we tell our children at the dinner table. (Lubrano, 2003, p. 5)

Our studies support Lubrano's suggestion that social class is one important source of normative guidelines for how to act as a person in the world. Specifically, they demonstrate that normatively good actions in WK contexts serve to promote similarity to and connection with others, rather than differentiation from others. The present research provides strong empirical support for Bourdieu's (1979/1984) classic sociological theory, which contends that people in WK contexts do not tend to focus on "distinction" from others—a pervasive theme in MD contexts—because they have relatively fewer material resources and instead need to focus on tasks that are relatively more critical for their functioning.

Theoretical Contributions of the Present Research

The studies presented here go beyond previous research by specifying how norms for relating to others—a defining feature of models of agency—differ in WK and MD contexts. These studies extend the social psychological literature on social class differences by (a) underscoring the importance of social class contexts in shaping psychological tendencies, (b) demonstrating that the meanings of choice are not inherent in the act of choosing, but rather vary by social class context, and (c) illuminating what normatively good actions and choices mean in both WK and MD contexts.

Across the five studies, we used a variety of cross-cutting methods and levels of analysis to ensure that our findings are robust. As predicted, the hypothesized models of agency were evident in normative preferences implied by (a) participants' choices, (b) participants' responses to others' choices, and (c) pervasive cultural products. Consistent with our hypotheses, in Studies 1 through 4, we found that people from WK backgrounds are relatively more likely to make and prefer choices that produce similarity to others and that people from MD backgrounds are relatively more likely to make and prefer choices that produce difference from others. In Study 5, we found that magazine ads targeting consumers in WK and MD contexts reflected the hypothesized models of agency.

Most of the behavioral studies presented here used samples that varied in racial composition. Even when statistically controlling for race or social class, it is impossible to fully disentangle their interrelated effects. In the studies that used racially diverse samples, however, our analyses revealed that the cultural differences

associated with social class remained consistent across racial or ethnic groups, increasing our confidence that these findings reflect meaningful differences related to social class, not differences associated primarily with race.

Mutual Constitution

Although the results supported our theory, they do not fully illuminate the process of the mutual constitution of culture and psyche (Fiske et al., 1998; Shweder, 1990). We hypothesize that exposure to cultural products, which represent different ideas about how to relate to others, is one important mechanism through which context-specific preferences are fostered and maintained. For example, in future studies, we could expose people to car ads containing different messages and subsequently assess the behavioral and attitudinal consequences. In support of this idea, a variety of recent studies have established links between cultural products and associated psychological tendencies (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Markus et al., 2006).

Social Class and Education

In our studies, the utility of parental educational attainment as an indicator of social class background underscores the importance of college in fostering MD models of agency (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1992) and raises the question of what produces this link. Social class divisions arise in part because of unequal access to education. Even in America, a society that claims to offer equal opportunity for social mobility, the best predictor of whether a person will graduate from college is whether one's parents did (Blau, Duncan, & Tyree, 1994). Experience in college also perpetuates social class divisions by encouraging students to see their success in terms of their own individual effort, thereby making it easier to rationalize inequality and maintain the status quo (Jackman & Muha, 1984).

Examining the role of a college education in fostering MD models of agency raises the question of how college affects students from WK backgrounds. Although cultural change is gradual, cultural models are relatively malleable and can change through engagement with new ideas and practices that may be prevalent in different sociocultural contexts (Jensen, 2004; Lubrano, 2003). Therefore, if students from WK contexts repeatedly engage with MD college contexts—which afford relatively more opportunities for choice—then their actions will eventually be shaped by models of agency that foster a normative preference for differentiation from others.

Alternative Interpretive Frameworks

Social status. Our theory is consistent with research showing that social status affects people's perceptions of themselves and others (see Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1995, 1998). In our research, we understand social class as a particular instantiation of the effects of unequal status in the social hierarchy. Lorenzi-Cioldi and colleagues theorize that dominant group members tend to emphasize the personal differentiation of their own group members, whereas subordinate group members tend to emphasize the holistic features that make their group different from other groups (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Doise, 1990; Lorenzi-Cioldi, Eagly, & Stewart, 1995). Our perspective extends this theory by focusing on the implications of social class status for the meanings of action. Given the link between social class and status, future research should examine the effects of status inequalities in other contexts such as those delineated by race, ethnicity, and gender.[16]

Conformity. One important implication of our findings is that there is more than one way to think about conformity. We have avoided the term *conformity* in our studies because it has predominantly negative associations within social psychology and American society. Research on conformity is a foundation of social psychological research, and most discussions following Asch (1956) still assume that conformity reflects underlying "psychic inadequacies" (p. 52). One could interpret our findings by observing that people in WK contexts mindlessly "conform" or embrace the preferences of others (see Kohn, 1969). To move away from this experience-distant view of conformity as a deficiency in agency, we take an experience-near approach focusing on the close interplay between the material conditions of the context and the kinds of actions that are likely to become normative and preferred. In WK contexts, conformity need not imply a blind imitation of others due to a lack of knowledge or understanding. Instead, it can be seen as an intentional adjustment to others' desires in order to fit in, belong, or maintain good relations with others (cf. Morling & Evered, 2006; Ross, Bierbrauer, & Hoffman, 1976).

In terms of a relatively more macro-level analysis of behavior, both seeking similarity and difference from others can be seen as conforming to the prevalent norms within a particular sociocultural context (see Kim & Markus, 1999). Classic sociological research suggests that the preference for differentiation that is prevalent in MD contexts reflects a widespread status anxiety (Gans, 1974; Veblen, 1899/1912). In an effort to maintain status within the social hierarchy, people in MD contexts may conform to the norm of individuation by striving to differentiate themselves from people in lower status positions (see also Ehrenreich, 1989; Fussell, 1983). Likewise, sociologists such as Lamont (2000) have argued that people in WK contexts may conform to the norm of similarity and connectedness to distance themselves from behaviors that are perceived as common in MD contexts—being fake or inauthentic, different for no apparent reason, and disconnected from others.

Present Psychological Theory and the Role of Choice

In many psychological theories, choice is equated with agency (see Markus & Kitayama, 2003; J. G. Miller, 2003); "free" choice often implies independence and indicates that one's actions have not been constrained by the influence of others (see Schwartz, Markus, & Snibbe, 2006). Choice can afford control (see Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Skinner, 1996), and when choosing, people tend to feel happier and healthier, perform better, and be more productive

[16] Status inequalities can be relatively enduring like those associated with race or gender, but they can also be created by the structure of a particular situation. For example, in voluntarily joining a preestablished group, new members are often initially assigned to a position of relatively low status. To achieve higher status within that group, members are often required to fit in with others and follow the group's commonly accepted rules and standards for behavior (cf. Crandall, 1988; Jetten, Hornsey, & Adarves-Yorno, 2006).

(Brehm, 1956; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Langer & Rodin, 1976). Having free choice and control is typically considered the most primary, developed, and thus preferred way to act in the world (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Other modes of action are thought to arise only when the primary mode is unavailable (e.g., Heckhausen & Schulz, 1999; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003).

If choice and control afford agency, and WK contexts provide fewer opportunities to experience choice and control (Gallo, Bogart, Vranceanu, & Matthews, 2005; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Mirowsky & Ross, 1986; Reay et al., 2001), then should we conclude that people in WK contexts have relatively less agency? On the basis of the findings of Snibbe and Markus (2005) and the studies presented here, we suggest that choice is likely to be somewhat less central to agency in WK relative to MD contexts, but we do not conclude that WK contexts promote relatively less agency. Rather, we theorize that actions in WK contexts are also agentic, yet shaped by models of agency that reflect a preference for similarity to and connection with others. This line of thinking resonates with J. G. Miller's (2003) view that people tend to experience a sense of individual agency even when their actions are focused on adjusting to social expectations and conforming to the preferences of others.

Conclusion

Although social class has received only scant attention in the field of psychology (Lott, 2002; Sears, 1986; Taylor, 1998), a comprehensive psychology cannot characterize behavior from only one perspective. The link between making independent choices and individual well-being is a mainstay of social psychology; yet, this generalization is drawn from research conducted with mostly middle-class European American participants who enjoy a relatively privileged status both within American society and the world as a whole. In fact, our studies comparing Americans from WK and MD contexts suggest that psychologists might productively rethink some of the field's foundational assumptions about choice. These assumptions include the idea that more choice is invariably beneficial, that the best choices are those made independently, and that choice matters mainly because it differentiates the self from others (see Iyengar & Lepper, 2000, 2002; Schwartz, 2004). Although the "same" action in different contexts may appear identical to an observer, the meaning of a given action derives from the ideas, practices, and material conditions of the context in which that action takes place (Bruner, 1990).

Beyond its theoretical implications, this observation has a variety of important practical consequences. Policymakers designing social programs or interventions targeting people in a particular context should first consider whether the basic tenets of a program are compatible with that context's local cultural norms and everyday social practices. Whether a program is designed to promote choice through democracy in Iraq or to offer parents a choice among schools in the United States, such policies should take into account that choice is an act of meaning and that choice may not be a primary and identical good in all contexts.

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