A Road Map for an Emerging Psychology of Social Class

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Abstract

Though the scientific study of social class is over a century old, theories regarding how social class shapes psychological experience are in their infancy. In this review, we provide a road map for the empirical study of an emerging psychology of social class. Specifically, we outline key measurement issues in the study of social class – including the importance of both objective indicators and subjective perceptions of social class – as well as theoretical insights into the role of the social class context in influencing behavior. We then summarize why a psychology of social class is likely to be a fruitful area of research and propose that social class environments guide psychological experience because they shape fundamental aspects of the self and patterns of relating to others. Finally, we differentiate social class from other rank-relevant states (e.g., power) and social categories (e.g., race/ethnicity), while also outlining potential avenues of future research.

Compared to the rest of the world, Americans – perhaps due to placing hope in the American Dream and the promise of equal opportunity – are remarkably uncomfortable talking about social class, and believe that it does not factor into their everyday lives (e.g., Kingston, 2000; Mantsios, 2006). Contrary to this belief, the United States is faced with record levels of income inequality and one of the lowest rates of social mobility among industrialized nations (Burkhauser, Feng, Jenkins, & Larrimore, 2009; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Picketty & Saez, 2003). The premise of this article is that this growing social class divide not only influences access to economic resources, but also provides one of the primary foundations of social life. For example, social class shapes people's daily lives by determining the neighborhoods in which they live and the occupations and organizations in which they participate (Domhoff, 1998). Social class also guides people's customs and preferences for art, music, and literature (Bourdieu, 1984; Snibbe & Markus, 2005), and it shapes the nature and trajectory of the life course, including risks for physiological and psychological hardship, as well as mortality rates (Adler et al., 1994). Despite its remarkable influence on the landscape of social and psychological experience, until very recently, psychologists have been largely absent from the study of social class (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Lott, 2002).

In this review, our goal is to provide a road map for researchers interested in this important area of inquiry – a road map for an emerging psychology of social class. To that end, we will outline some key considerations for researchers embarking on an empirical study of social class. First, we will outline some critical steps to take when measuring the social class construct – including how to measure both individuals' objective (e.g., educational attainment) and subjective (e.g. perception of rank in the hierarchy) social class, while also taking into account how social class contexts are likely to shape a person's experiences. Second, we will summarize why a psychology of social class is likely to

be a fruitful area of research. Specifically, we propose that social class contexts guide psychological experience because they shape fundamental aspects of the self and patterns of relating to others. In American contexts, these social class differences are expressed in terms of relatively greater independence and freedom of self-expression among individuals with higher social class standing and greater interdependence and social connection among individuals with lower social class standing. Third, we will discuss what is unique about social class, compared to other rank-relevant states (e.g., power) and categories of social experience (e.g., race/ethnicity).

How is Social Class Measured?

There is an ongoing and contentious debate in the social sciences about the best single measure of social class. In what follows, we will review some of the most commonly used objective and subjective measures of the social class construct. We will also discuss how social contexts that differ by social class play a role in creating the cultural norms and expectations that promote class-specific psychological patterns.[1]

Objective Social Class

Social class shapes people's everyday life experiences because it is defined, in part, by an individual's access to important material (e.g., financial assets, transportation, healthcare) and social (e.g., influential social networks, class-specific norms or values) resources. There are various objective indicators of social class that provide distinct pathways through which individuals can access these resources. Most research at the level of individuals has focused on level of educational attainment, income (personal or household), and occupation as the foundations of objective social class (Lareau & Conley, 2008; Oakes & Rossi, 2003).

Educational attainment is often considered to be the most fundamental measure of social class because it provides access to elevated income, to prestigious occupations, and to the types of cultural capital needed to thrive in middle- and upper-class environments (see Snibbe & Markus, 2005). For example, people who have attained 4-year college degrees can expect to earn twice as much money over the life course compared to people who have attained high-school degrees (Day & Newburger, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). A college degree also provides individuals with important cultural knowledge (e.g., manners, customs) and access to influential social networks (e.g., political connections; Domhoff, 1998).

Recent increases in economic inequality in the United States, as well as other countries (e.g., Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Norton & Ariely, 2011) highlight the importance of income as another indicator of social class. Income is an informative measure because it provides the most direct assessment of an individual's access to valued material goods and services (e.g., healthy food, reliable transportation). Income also predicts important life-outcomes related to social class: For instance, measures of household income cross-nationally predict reduced subjective well-being among lower-income individuals compared to their higher-income counterparts (Howell & Howell, 2008).

Finally, occupation is an important indicator of social class because occupations carry with them their own set of formative contexts and psychological experiences. For example, higher prestige, professional occupations (e.g., law, medicine) – those afforded by high levels of educational attainment – tend to expose people to high levels of variety of tasks, substantive complexity, and freedom of choice. In contrast, lower prestige,

working-class occupations (e.g., construction, service industries) tend to expose people to high levels of supervision, routine, and limited opportunities for choice and control (e.g., Kohn & Schoenbach, 1983; Kohn & Schooler, 1983). These three measures – educational attainment, income, and occupation – represent the most widely used indices of an individual's objective social class.

Subjective Social Class

Although they are important, these three objective measures are not the only indicators of one's social class. Above and beyond objective indicators of social class, people's perceptions of where they reside in the social hierarchy make a difference for psychological functioning (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010). In other words, social class is more than simply how much one has; rather, it is also how much one believes one has *relative to others*.

This recognition has led researchers to consider another aspect of social class – one's subjective perceptions of rank in society vis-à-vis others. The most widely-used index of social class rank is the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). In this measure, participants rank themselves in society or in one's local community on a ladder with 10 rungs representing ascending levels of income, education, and occupation (Adler et al., 2000; Goodman et al., 2001).

Research using this measure supports the idea that subjective perceptions of rank are an important and distinct aspect of social class. For instance, studies examining social class disparities in health demonstrate that subjective social class – measured using the MacArthur scale – predicts individuals' perceptions of their health as well as their actual physiological health (e.g., susceptibility to a cold-causing virus). These findings hold even after accounting for objective measures of social class such as educational attainment and income (Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008). Together, objective measures of social class – education, income, and occupation – and subjective perceptions of rank are important routes through which social class shapes psychological functioning.

Social Class as a Context

Education, income, occupation, and perceived rank are meaningful indicators of social class, in part, because they shape the social contexts to which people are exposed. For example, consider that people tend to live in neighborhoods, attend schools (Kusserow, 2004; Lareau, 2003; Nisbett, 2009), work together with (Argyle, 1994), and date and marry individuals from similar social class backgrounds (Sweeney & Cancian, 2004). Central to an emerging psychological study of social class is the understanding that social class is not simply a trait of individuals. Instead, social class is rendered meaningful through the contexts that people inhabit over time.

The above examples illustrate that contexts are systematically organized by social class. These social class contexts expose people to common material and social conditions, which foster and require certain types of behavior over time. For example, limited economic assets in working-class contexts might mean that people must rely on others rather than on the healthcare system in times of physical illness (e.g., caring for a sick relative). Over time, these behavioral patterns become norms and expectations for the self and for how to relate to others. In this fashion, social class contexts serve to socialize and reinforce class-specific psychological patterns.

Recent research on social class has provided several examples suggesting the importance of social class contexts in shaping psychological patterns. For instance, Stephens et al.

(forthcoming) have found that educational contexts convey particular social class values and expectations for how to be an appropriate student. American colleges and universities are predominantly middle- and upper-class contexts: that is, they were created and organized by some of the most highly educated and wealthy individuals in American society (c.f., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As a consequence, these contexts are not neutral or blind to social class. Instead, they reflect and perpetuate the particular cultural norms, values, and expectations that are most common among individuals who have experience in these middle- and upper-class contexts (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, forthcoming).

Contexts also provide information about personal social class rank and, as a result, may shape class-specific psychological patterns through these relative rank perceptions. For example, a person from a middle-class family background at an elite, private university may actually feel lower in social class as a result of comparisons to students from more wealthy and educated families. This comparison may in turn lead that person to express psychological patterns consistent with an individual from a lower social class background. In one illustrative study, Johnson, Richeson, and Finkel (2011) examined academic competency beliefs at an elite private university. The researchers found that students from middle-class families felt more socially rejected in this elite context and had greater concerns about their own academic competency in comparison to more affluent, upper-class students (Johnson et al., 2011).

These examples illustrate an important consideration in the study of social class – that contexts are organized by social class and these contexts fundamentally shape the norms, values, and expectations to which individuals are exposed. In the section that follows, we turn to the question, ''Why should psychologists study social class?'' We answer this question by detailing how social class contexts guide class-specific psychological experiences related to conceptions of the self and patterns of relating to others.

Why Should Psychologists Study Social Class?

Though sociologists have studied social class for centuries, theories of social class have historically been confined to the group or societal levels (Durkheim, 1802; Marx & Engels, 1973/1848; Weber, 1958), and the potential impact of social class on individuals' psychological states has gone largely undeveloped in this early work. In the time since, researchers have learned a great deal about how social class shapes the important contexts (e.g., neighborhoods, educational settings) in which people spend the majority of their daily lives (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2003), and the causes and consequences of social class disparities in health and psychological well-being (Adler et al., 1994). Despite this initial research, the question of how social class shapes individual psychological experience represents a rich and relatively uncharted terrain for future research.

Social Class and the Self

Recent research suggests that social class differences in the material and social conditions of the environment promote divergent conceptions of the self and patterns of relating to others. For example, in lower social class environments, the self is assumed to be connected and interdependent with others (e.g., Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). In lower social class environments of resource scarcity and diminished rank, individuals often experience situations that do not lend themselves to personal influence, choice, or control (Lachman & Weaver, 1998;

Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Moreover, when people from lower social class contexts encounter adversity (e.g., lose a job), they do not have the same type of material and economic safety net that is prevalent in higher social class contexts, and thus, people often need to rely on others for financial and social support (Lamont, 2000). Over time, due to the diminished resources, uncertainty, and unpredictability of their life contexts, individuals from lower social class contexts come to understand themselves as connected to others and as responsive to the social environment.

In contrast, the material and social environments of higher social class individuals prioritize independence, personal freedom, and choice. In higher social class contexts, the self is assumed to be separate and independent from others, and as such, it is normative to stand out from others and to display one's influence over others and the social context. Exposed to social environments with abundant material resources and elevated societal rank, higher social class individuals are free to pursue the goals and interests they choose for themselves (Johnson & Krueger, 2005; Lachman & Weaver, 1998), and to do so relatively free of concerns about material constraints. We theorize that these higher social class contexts enable people to experience themselves as distinct and separate from others, and as independent agents who are able to influence the world according to their personal preferences.

These systematic social class differences in the material and social conditions of the environment foster different conceptions of the self, which, in turn, provide different blueprints for appropriate behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). For example, reflecting the emergence of these class-specific blueprints for the self, Weininger and Lareau (2009) found – using detailed interviews and observations – that whereas working-class parents stressed that their children should blend into their elementary school environments, parents from middle-class families were more likely to stress the importance of their children's curiosity and independence.

As a second example, Stephens et al. (2007)conducted a series of experimental studies that illuminate social class differences in the self. Specifically, these studies found that individuals from lower social class contexts tended to make choices that reflected a preference to be like others, whereas individuals from higher social class contexts tended to make choices that reflected a preference to differentiate themselves from others. For example, in one field study, college students from diverse social class backgrounds were presented with five pens (of two different colors) and asked to choose one as thanks for completing a prior survey. Four pens shared the same color (i.e., the majority pens) whereas one pen was the only one of its color (i.e., the minority pen). In the study, students from working-class backgrounds – whose parents had not earned a four-year college degree – more often chose the common or ''majority'' pen that resembled the other pens, suggesting a preference to be similar to others. In contrast, students from middle-class backgrounds – who had at least one parent with a four-year college degree – were more likely to choose a unique or ''minority'' pen, reflecting preferences to stand out and be independent from others (Stephens et al., 2007; see Figure 1).

These social class differences in understandings of the self and behavior are also likely to have far-reaching consequences for students' experiences in American academic contexts – in which the dominant cultural expectation is one of independence, self-expression, and personal freedom. For example, in a series of experiments (Stephens et al., forthcoming), American college students were assigned to read one of two university welcome messages, ostensibly from the university president. One message framed the university culture as independent (e.g., as about independent thinking and learning), while the other framed the university culture as interdependent (e.g., as about learning and
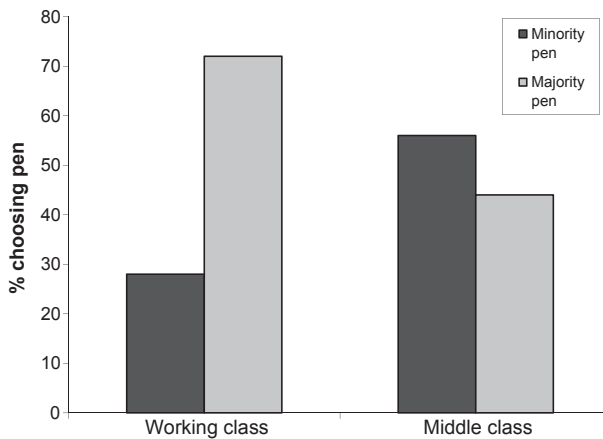
Figure 1   Percentage of participants who choose majority/minority pen by social class background.

working together with others). For students from working-class backgrounds, whose motives for attending college often focus on helping others and contributing to their community, the independent message created a sense of cultural mismatch that undermined their performance. Specifically, when the college experience was represented as focusing on norms of independence (i.e., the cultural status quo in American universities), the typical social class performance gap observed in American higher education emerged. That is, students from working-class backgrounds performed worse on academic tasks compared to students from middle-class backgrounds. However, when the college experience was represented as focusing on norms of interdependence, this social class gap in performance was eliminated: Students from working-class backgrounds performed just as well as their relatively privileged peers (Stephens et al., forthcoming).

Social Class and Patterns of Relating to Others

Class-related differences in conceptions of the self also engender different patterns of relating to others. Given exposure to norms of fitting in and prioritizing others' needs, people with lower social class standing tend to be more socially responsive compared to people with higher social class standing. That is, people with lower social class standing tend to relate to others more easily, to understand others' emotions more accurately, and to engage in more pro-social behavior. For example, Kraus and Keltner (2009) had university students from different social class backgrounds, measured in terms of parental education and income, engage in a social interaction with a stranger. In these interactions, individuals from lower social class backgrounds were more socially engaged, as evidenced by the tendency to display more head nods, laugh more, and engage in more eye contact with their interaction partner relative to individuals from higher social class backgrounds. In contrast, participants from higher social class backgrounds were relatively more disengaged during the interaction, as evidenced by the tendency to more often groom themselves, check their cell phones, and doodle on a questionnaire.

Empathic accuracy, or the ability to read others' emotions, is another indicator of the increased social responsiveness that is characteristic of people from lower social class contexts. Individuals from lower social class backgrounds tend to show elevated empathic accuracy, because reading others' emotions is essential for developing the social connections that are valued and expected in lower social class environments. In one illustrative

study, individuals with lower social class standing (i.e., high-school educated university employees) were better able to read emotions that were presented in static facial images than individuals with higher social class standing (i.e., college-educated university employees; Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010). In a second study demonstrating the importance of subjective social class, participants varying in education and income were asked to think about an interaction with someone either very high or very low in social class rank. Participants who perceived themselves as lower in social class during this manipulation task performed better on a measure of empathic accuracy – in which they deciphered emotions expressed in subtle micro-expressions of the eyes – than participants who perceived themselves as higher in social class (Kraus et al., 2010).

Interdependence and social responsiveness – ways of relating to others that are valued and expected in lower social class environments – should also engender more pro-social action among people from these lower social class contexts. For instance, a nationally representative telephone survey found that people of lower household incomes tended to give a higher proportion of their salary to charity than their higher-income counterparts (Independent Sector, 2002). Providing initial laboratory support, Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, and Keltner (2010) found that people from lower social class environments – measured both in terms of material resources and subjective rank perceptions – were more likely to behave pro-socially toward others relative to people from higher social class environments. In one illustrative study, participants who were lower in self-reported subjective social class gave a larger portion of 10 points – that would ostensibly be converted to actual money – to an anonymous experimenter partner relative to those who were higher in subjective social class (Piff et al., 2010).

Taken together, the research we have outlined above suggests that the social class contexts people inhabit over time reinforce specific norms, values, and expectations that, in turn, powerfully influence individual psychological conceptions of the self and patterns of relating to others. In the final section of this article, we now focus on distinguishing the construct of social class from other psychological forms of rank.

How Does Social Class Differ From Other Forms of Rank?

Social class is only one source of social rank that individuals experience in their daily lives. In some cases, forms of rank (e.g., power, status, race/ethnicity, gender) overlap with social class and have converging effects on behavior and psychological functioning. For example, elevated social class in a given society provides an individual with opportunities for increased power – defined as control and influence over others' rewards and punishments (Domhoff, 1998; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) and status – defined as elevated prestige and respect in the eyes of others (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001). Not surprisingly, social class also has some parallels with the social categories of gender and race/ethnicity, categories that also shape one's resources and rank in society, as well as how others perceive one's social standing (e.g., Fiske, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995). While there is remarkable convergence between different forms of rank, in this section, we outline conceptual issues that help to distinguish social class from other rank-related constructs (see Table 1).

Social Class and Power

Researchers have long studied the influence of social power on psychological experience (Fiske, 1993, 2010; Guinote & Vescio, 2010). Much can be learned about the impact of

Table 1   Similarities and differences between social class and other rank-relevant states and categories of social experience

Category of comparison	Social class similarities	Social class differences
Power	Sense of control independence from others	Time course (chronic v. relationship-specific) Origins (social class contexts versus traits)
Group status	Perceived rank	Stereotypes (upper-class seen as selfish, low in warmth, unworthy of respect) Pro-sociality (higher social class individuals are less pro-social)
Social categories (race/ethnicity and gender)	Stigmatization stereotype threat	Institutionalization (unclear social class categories) Signaling (relative inaccuracy or ambiguity of social class signals) Malleability (social class can change more easily)

social class on behavior by examining social power. For instance, theoretical accounts of power suggest that the control and freedom associated with higher power allow individuals to more effectively pursue their goals (Guinote, 2008), resist the influence of other individuals (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008), focus on internal rewards (Keltner et al., 2003), and express the self more consistently across different social contexts (Kraus, Chen, and Keltner, 2011), relative to low-power individuals. Similarly, individuals from higher social class environments, like high-power individuals, experience an elevated sense of personal control over their own lives (Johnson & Krueger, 2005, 2006; Lachman & Weaver, 1998).

However, despite these similarities in effects on perceived control, there are several distinctions between power and social class that differentiate these forms of social rank. First, power tends to be less consistent and more specific to a given relationship or context. For instance, a cafeteria worker may have very little power during the work day, but after work, he or she may have a great deal of control or influence over relationships at home. In contrast, though perceptions of one's social class standing may vary from situation to situation (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011), in general, the experiences associated with social class are relatively stable. Social class includes a rich system of cultural expectations, manners, customs, and social norms that lead to relatively consistent patterns of psychological processes across situations and contexts. For example, illustrating some of the more chronic influences of social class, the continued experience of reduced material resources and rank relative to others is an important factor that contributes to the worse health outcomes experienced by people with lower social class standing relative to people with higher social class standing (Adler et al., 1994).

Power and social class are also likely to have distinct origins. Research suggests that personality traits, such as extraversion, predict obtaining influential positions in social groups (e.g., college fraternities; Anderson et al., 2001). In contrast, personality factors tend to vary widely across people of differing social class backgrounds (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Social class position arises from a constellation of contextual experiences over the life course, including one's early childhood environment and the material and social resources available to one's parents (Lareau, 2003). In short, although there is some convergence in the psychological experiences of social class and power, the two constructs also differ considerably in both their situational stability and their origins.

Social Class and Group Status

Group status refers to the extent that individuals are respected and admired by others in their face-to-face social groups (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Research indicates that individuals attain status by presenting their value to other group members (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). That is, people attain high status through a number of means, including appearing more competent than other individuals (e.g., by vocally expressing one's opinion; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), or putting the groups' interests ahead of one's own (e.g., giving more than receiving help in one's social group; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006).

Social class and group status also have some clear differences. For example, being wealthy or well-educated does not guarantee that one will be respected or admired, and in fact, some well known examples indicate that extremely wealthy individuals are not always viewed as high status, but instead can be viewed with scorn or derision (e.g., Bernie Madoff). Likewise, stereotypes of upper-class individuals in America are that they are selfish, inattentive to others, and low in interpersonal warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), characteristics that detract from one's received respect or admiration. Conversely, stereotypes of the working-class involve beliefs that these individuals are tough, hard-working, and straightforward – traits that are likely to garner respect from others. Along the same lines, research indicates that behaviors related to pro-social helping – that tend to foster elevated status (Flynn et al., 2006) – are more likely to occur among people from lower social class backgrounds (Piff et al., 2010). In sum, an individual's social class standing in society is related to but need not correspond to the amount of respect and admiration that one receives from others.

Social Class, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender

Similar to social class, race/ethnicity and gender are status-based contexts that provide a particular blueprint for how individuals are expected to behave. These social categories have some converging effects on conceptions of the self and patterns of relating to others. For example, Cross and Madson (1997) find that low status in terms of gender (i.e., being female), like social class, promotes more interdependent norms for relating to others. Research on race/ethnicity parallels these findings, such that lower status racial/ethnic minorities in American society tend to regulate their behavior according to more relational norms than their relatively higher status, European-American peers (e.g., Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Nobles, 1972).

Social class, race/ethnicity, and gender can also have similar effects on the extent to which people feel like they belong or feel marginalized in academic settings (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, Croizet and Claire (1998) examined how anxiety stemming from expectations of confirming negative stereotypes about academic performance would impact the test scores of students from lower social class backgrounds. In the study, students from lower social class backgrounds – measured in terms of the occupational status of their parents – took an academic test that was framed as either diagnostic of ability or not diagnostic. When the test was framed as diagnostic of ability, students from lower social class backgrounds were presumably more anxious about confirming negative stereotypes about their social class, and as a result, performed worse than when the test was framed as not diagnostic of ability (see also Spencer & Castano, 2007). This finding parallels stereotype threat effects observed in terms of race/ethnicity and gender (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Despite these similarities, there are several important distinctions between the effects of social class, gender, and race/ethnicity. For example, social class is less institutionalized in American society – at least at a conscious or explicit level – compared to gender and race/ethnicity. While the U.S. census categorizes individuals based on race/ethnicity and gender, it does not categorize people according to distinct social class categories (Dimaggio, 2012). Consistent with this institutional avoidance of social class categories, many Americans have trouble identifying their location in the social hierarchy and are not able to accurately label or report their social class (Hout, 2008).

Also unlike gender and race/ethnicity – social categories with relatively clear physical signals (e.g., Knowles & Peng, 2005) – the indicators of social class are not always immediately apparent. For example, people do not always showcase their bank statements, degrees, or occupational titles. Many theorists argue that gender and race/ethnicity are fundamental social categories that guide perception (e.g., Ridgeway, 2011), and research reveals that categorization by gender and race/ethnicity is automatic and occurs instantaneously (e.g., Ito & Urland, 2003). Though some studies suggest that social class can be signaled by particular behaviors and cultural aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984), these signals tend to be much less clear than the markers of gender and race/ethnicity. In one study, naïve observers watched 60 seconds of an interaction between university students and were asked to guess the social class of the participants based on viewing this brief interaction. While the observers showed greater-than-chance accuracy in guessing the interaction participants' social class, the correlations ($r = .23$) were well below what is typically expected for judgments of race/ethnicity and gender using similar stimuli (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

Another difference between race/ethnicity, gender, and social class is that social class standing is relatively malleable. Although social class change is gradual and not without its obstacles (Stephens et al., forthcoming), one's own and others' perceptions of one's social class standing in society can change over time. For example, for students from working-class backgrounds, the experience of college education is often transformative, because it brings students into contact with a different set of norms, values, and expectations. The prestige and status that comes with a four-year degree, along with the acculturation process that occurs in college, can initiate a lifelong process of change and can further contribute to upward social mobility (e.g., Miller, Kohn, & Schooler, 1986; Newcomb, 1943). In contrast, a person's racial or gender identity is likely – with few exceptions – to remain stable throughout their lives.

All told, social class shares important features in common with gender and race/ethnicity, but is also distinct from these other rank-relevant social categories. While some converging effects have been observed in prior research, points of divergence also exist that set social class apart from other rank-relevant states and categories of social experience.

Social Class as a New Frontier for Psychology

In this review we have taken steps to assist researchers in understanding an emerging psychology of social class. It is our hope that this road map will guide future empirical work and will help researchers to identify key issues in the examination of social class influences on thought, feeling, and action.

We have outlined what we believe are currently some of the key measurement issues in the social psychological study of social class. Though most large-scale representative surveys focus on objective measures of social class (e.g., occupation, income), these measures represent only a first step in understanding the close interplay between social class and individuals' psychological experience and life outcomes. Importantly, researchers

attempting to better capture social class differences in psychological experiences must also account for the individual's subjective perceptions of social class rank relative to others, as well as how the social context shapes class-specific norms, values, and expectations.

The close interplay between social class contexts and psychological functioning is an important area of future research. As more and more students from working-class backgrounds attend four-year colleges and universities (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007), these students face significant social and cultural obstacles that stem from having to navigate an unfamiliar social class context with distinct expectations for their behavior (Stephens et al., forthcoming). Future research might consider how to develop interventions that can ease working-class students' transition from high school to college. More generally, it is also important to understand how class-based expectations are institutionalized (e.g., politics, the media, healthcare) and how they affect people from different social class contexts.

Within our road map, we have also proposed a model for how social class contexts shape psychological experience (see also, Kraus, Piff, and Keltner, 2011; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). In this model, we propose that social class environments lead to increased independence and freedom of self-expression among individuals from higher social class contexts and increased social connection and interdependence among individuals from lower social class contexts. Moreover, we propose that these class-related differences in independence and interdependence shape conceptions of the self and patterns of relating to others. We have provided empirical evidence in support of this theory, and future research should empirically test whether these models help to explain psychological experience in other realms of social life. For example, does interdependence lead individuals from lower social class environments to experience greater emotional contagion in social relationships with others? Does independence and freedom of expression lead individuals from higher social class contexts to judge others' intentions and traits in a manner consistent with their own intentions?

Finally, although there is some convergence between social class and other forms and categorizations of rank and social experience, research also suggests that social class is a distinct form of social rank. Importantly, treating social class as a distinct construct allows researchers to examine the effects of intersecting forms of rank in society. In this vein, one question concerns the ways in which the experience of social class varies by race/ethnicity and gender (e.g., Ostrove, Adler, Kuppermann, & Washington, 2000). For example, would individuals from a higher social class environment who also belong to a lower status gender or race/ethnicity value independence, choice, and freedom of self-expression to the same degree as other people from higher social class environments who belong to a higher status gender or race/ethnicity? Future research is necessary to examine this question.

The growing social class divide that characterizes life in many countries around the world is both a pressing social problem and an emerging area of empirical research. In this article, we have provided what we hope is a useful roadmap for navigating some of the important measurement choices and conceptual distinctions in this emerging area. Understanding how the social class divide shapes the contexts individuals inhabit, as well as their basic psychological patterns, promises to be an important area of research in the future.

Short Biographies

Michael W. Kraus' research focuses on understanding how (1) status (e.g., power, social class), (2) emotion, and (3) the self shape interpersonal life, and he studies these topics

through a variety of methods ranging from controlled laboratory experiments to ethological observations. Kraus' research focusing on the influence of social class on empathy, attribution, or prosocial behavior can be found in journals such as *Psychological Science, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Current Directions in Psychological Science,* or *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Kraus was trained as a social–personality psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley where he received his BA and Ph.D. Currently, he studies the influences of social class on health at the University of California, San Francisco. In the fall of 2012, Kraus will be joining the faculty at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Nicole M. Stephens is an Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations at Kellogg School of Management. She received her BA from Williams College and her PhD in Social Psychology from Stanford University. As a social and cultural psychologist, her research focuses on the ways in which the social world systematically influences how people understand themselves and their actions. Specifically, she examines how social class, race, ethnicity, and gender shape people's everyday life experiences, including important life outcomes such as educational attainment and health. Together her research illuminates how seemingly neutral assumptions about what it means to be a ''good,'' ''normal,'' or ''educated'' person reflect the culturally-specific perspectives of majority groups in society, and thereby contribute to social inequality. The underlying goal of this research is to develop more diverse and effective schools, workplaces, and communities. She has published in leading academic journals such as *Psychological Science, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Social and Personality Psychology Science*.

Endnotes

[1] Social class categories can be described in many different ways (Hout, 2008). In this review, we use the terms *working-class* or *lower social class* interchangeably to refer to individuals or contexts characterized by relatively reduced material resources and lower rank, while we use the terms *middle-class, upper-class,* or *higher social class* interchangeably to refer to contexts characterized by elevated material resources and higher rank.

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