Handbook of Social Psychology: Social Class

Nicole M. Stephens and Lydia Emery

Northwestern University

Sarah S. M. Townsend

University of Southern California

Author Note

Nicole M. Stephens, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University; Lydia Emery, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University; Sarah S. M. Townsend, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to: Nicole M. Stephens, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2211 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208; Email: [n-stephens@kellogg.northwestern.edu](mailto:n-stephens@kellogg.northwestern.edu).

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Social Class

Social class is one of the most consequential social divides of our time. Social class begins with inequalities in material resources, but its influences on psychology and behavior are vast. Social class shapes people’s trust in government, and their votes for gun control, abortion rights, and marriage equality (Cooper, 2015; Galson, 2014; McQuarrie, 2017; Prysby, 2020; Schaffner et al., 2018; Van der Waal et al., 2007). It also guides how people define what is moral–for example, what it means to be a good person, parent, or child (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). These social class differences are far from neutral; they have a profound influence on whether it is possible for people to gain access to the educational opportunities and cultural capital that will help secure a bright future for their children (e.g., Grusky et al., 2019; Lareau & Calarco, 2012). These social class differences become the vehicle through which society measures and assigns a person’s worth or value (e.g., Ridgeway & Markus, in press). Those who have access to more of the “right” ways of being are judged as having greater worth or value, and those who have less of the “right” ways are devalued and judged as inferior (Loughnan et al., 2014; Fiske & Markus, 2012).

The magnitude of the social class divide continues to grow. Currently, people’s social class origins have an even more profound impact on life opportunities and outcomes than they did historically (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Connor et al., 2021; Côté et al., 2015; Bianchi et al., 2004; Hoff & Laursen, 2019). For example, in the United States, skyrocketing rates of inequality have been accompanied by higher rates of geographic segregation based on household income (Massey, 2020; Mayer, 2002; Massey & Tannen, 2016; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011; Watson, 2009). Geographic segregation, in turn, widens the social class gap in access to educational opportunities, which further amplifies disparities in test scores (Grusky et al., 2019; Reardon, 2011). Indeed, rising income inequality has led wealthy parents to devote more time, energy, and financial resources to “hoarding” opportunities and advantages for their children by developing their academic skills, building their college-bound resumes, and cultivating their signals of merit (Grusky et al., 2019; Reeves, 2018; Schneider et al., 2018).

Moreover, this widening social class divide—and its corresponding assumptions of differential value or worth—is not only morally questionable; it has become a threat to the social fabric and institutions that sustain that society. It has led large segments of the population, especially the White working-class, to question ideas that were previously taken for granted, such as the existence of equal opportunity and the belief that people who work hard will reap the benefits of their labor (Browman et al., 2021; Cooper, 2015; Day & Fiske, 2017; DeOrtentiis et al., 2022; Galson, 2014). Instead, the resounding story is that out of touch elites have “rigged” the game by defining the rules in their own image. This deepening divide has even inspired a potent distrust of the so-called “facts,” the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and systemic threats to the institutions necessary for a healthy democracy (Kim et al., 2022; Whitson et al., 2015). For example, perhaps it is not surprising that labeling White, working-class Americans as “inferior” and positioning them as “strangers in their own land” has led them to challenge and erode the very norms, values, and institutions that have cast them to the margins (Hochschild, 2016; Williams, 2016; 2017).

Although social psychology has been slow to recognize the significance of social class, the changes described above highlight why the field can no longer ignore it. Social psychology must take social class into account to explain human behavior. As a testament to these profound changes, this is the first chapter in the history of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* to focus on social class. In this chapter, we propose a social-class-in-context perspective that claims that understanding social class requires attention to how different social class contexts pattern psychology and behavior through four interacting levels of culture: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals.

In the following sections, we first discuss what social class is and how it differs from related constructs. Second, we review how the study of social class within social psychology has evolved over time to develop new theoretical perspectives and span multiple levels of culture. Third, we describe and compare the two most influential social psychological perspectives on social class: social-cognitive and sociocultural. Fourth, drawing from insights across these theoretical perspectives, we organize and review relevant research that highlights how social class shapes psychology and behavior through the four levels of culture. Finally, we highlight important future directions for the study of social class within social psychology.

# What is Social Class?

As a relatively new topic of inquiry in social psychology, scholars have rarely provided substantive definitions of social class (Antonoplis, in press). Instead, most scholars describe how they operationalize or measure it (e.g., “social class is based on income, education, and occupation”). For example, Kraus and Stephens (2012) state that “Social class (...) 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” (p. 643). This statement illustrates that existing definitions describe social class in general terms, as consisting of a range of material and social conditions (e.g., financial assets). However, they do not provide a detailed or substantive description of what social class is. For example, most social psychological definitions do not clarify if social class *is* equivalent to material resources, a social context, or a social category. Moreover, existing definitions do not clarify how material and social conditions (e.g, financial resources or cultural norms) relate to other core components of social class, such as power and status.

Drawing on decades of theory in psychology and sociology, we propose a novel definition that goes beyond prior definitions of class by providing a more comprehensive and detailed depiction of what social class *is* and how its core elements (e.g., financial resources, power and status, cultural norms) relate to each other. Like other categories such as race and gender that are socially constructed, so too is social class (e.g., Markus & Moya, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). As shown in Figure 1, we define social class as a social category that is based on the material and social conditions of the environments people inhabit–including educational attainment, financial resources, and occupations–that rank people in a hierarchy by assigning different levels of power and status.

We use the term *social class contexts* to refer to these environments that differ in material and social conditions, proximal psychological affordances (i.e., power and status), and downstream cultural affordances (e.g., particular ideas, ways of interacting, individual mindsets). We use the term *material and social conditions* to refer to the broad set of features that characterize these contexts: not only educational attainment, financial resources, and occupations, but also neighborhood, geographic mobility, socialization in schools and families, and opportunities for choice, influence, and control. Although higher- and lower-class contexts foster meaningful–and often divisive–social class differences across the four levels of culture, these contexts are not monolithic or impermeable; that is, people can transition in and out of these contexts, and people who participate in these contexts vary in their access to specific conditions, such as the amount of choice or attainment of education or income.[[1]](#footnote-1)

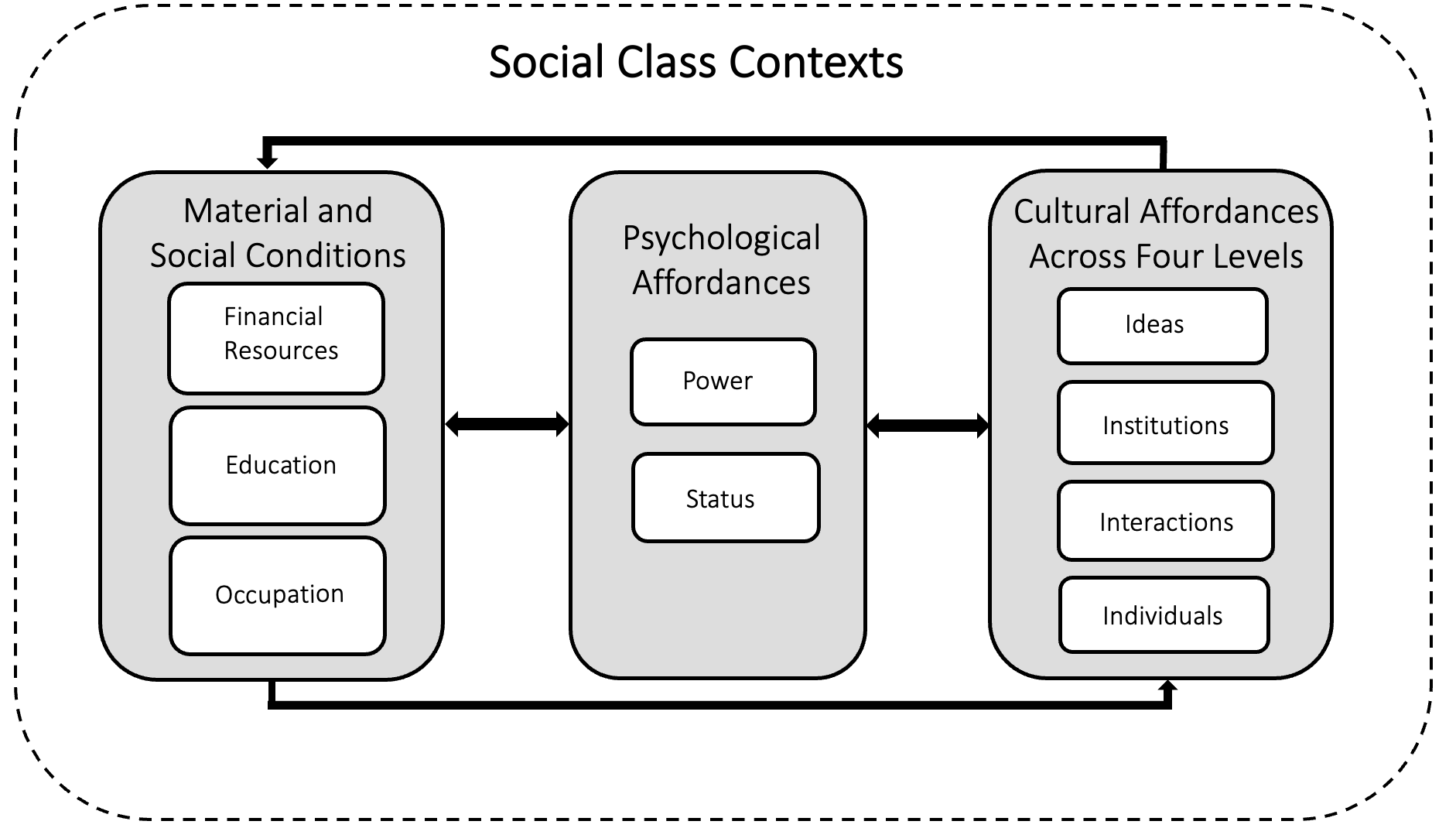
Exposure to the material and social conditions of different social class contexts serves to rank people in a hierarchy by assigning different levels of power and status. For example, when people participate in contexts that offer higher levels of educational attainment, more financial resources, and more prestigious occupations, they will be granted higher levels of power and status in society more broadly. *Power* is derived from the material conditions of the context (e.g., financial resources), and refers to the ability to influence others by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments (see Anderson, this volume). *Status* is relatively more subjective than power and refers to the esteem or respect that others accord to an individual (Fast et al., 2012; Ridgeway & Markus, in press). These levels of both power and status rank people in a social class hierarchy by conveying to others information about people’s ostensible worth, value, or competence. In turn, by offering both high (or low) power and status over time, different social class contexts afford a constellation of psychological and behavioral tendencies that manifest across the four levels of culture (see Figure 1).

Social class is, therefore, much more than the acute experience of either power or status in any immediate situation. It is based on the psychological and behavioral tendencies that emerge over time from participating in contexts that vary systematically in their material and social conditions, as well as their psychological affordances of power and status (Adams et al., 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012). This recognition of the chronic influence of social class contrasts with the ways in which social psychologists typically study power and status: as situational phenomena that transcend social groups such as race, gender, social class, historical time periods, or nations. For example, social psychologists often study power and status as both acontextual and ahistorical situational factors that they can manipulate in the laboratory (e.g., by asking participants to think of a time when they had high or low power) or as cross-cutting, general experiences that they can capture through a survey (e.g., Blader & Chen, 2012; Galinsky et al., 2003, 2008; Smith & Hofmann, 2016).

Our definition of social class includes material and social conditions, which are relatively objective and their psychological affordances (power and status), which are relatively subjective.[[2]](#footnote-2) This definition builds on and extends insights from research and theory in both sociology and psychology. Most work in sociology has conceived of social class from a materialist lens that focuses on social class as one’s objective position in relation to the labor market (e.g., how people earn their money, how much money they have; Hout, 2008; Marx, 1906; Wright, 1997). However, some sociological definitions also incorporate the idea that social class includes cultural and subjective elements, such as cultural preferences or sense of identity (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 2012; Lareau & Conley, 2008). For example, Bourdieu argues that analyses of social class must also include an understanding of the experiences in class-specific environments or “habitus” that translate one’s material conditions into class-specific lifestyle indicators, tastes, and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1977; 1995; Swartz, 1997). Building on approaches that incorporate both objective and subjective elements, most social psychologists measure social class in a way that acknowledges the critical importance of both of these elements (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

**Figure 1.**

*How Social Class is Created*

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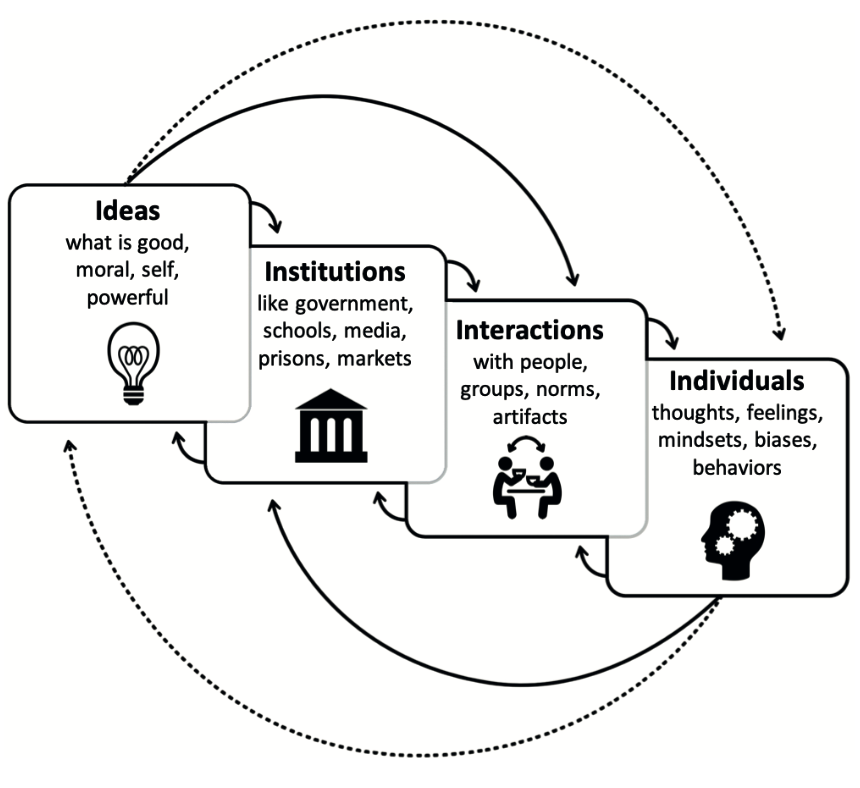
## Social Class Shapes Psychology and Behavior at Four Levels of Culture

Our definition of social class emphasizes that social class is a social category that is rendered meaningful through people’s participation in social class contexts. As noted above, social class contexts are environments that differ in their material and social conditions and psychological affordances. However, these social class contexts are not the same everywhere; they are historically and socially constructed environments that shape psychology and behavior in culture-specific ways. In other words, social class contexts are *sociocultural contexts*. Although we focus here on sociocultural contexts that differ by social class, these contexts are always intersectional and influence psychology and behavior in relation to other sociocultural contexts (e.g., nation of origin, race, gender, sexuality, age, and so on.).[[3]](#footnote-3)

To understand how social class shapes psychology and behavior, it is critical to take a social-class-in-context perspective. We propose that fully understanding social class requires considering how social class contexts pattern psychology and behavior through each of the four interacting levels of culture: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2014). Although the term *culture* is broad and has been defined in many different ways (see Adams & Markus, 2004), cultural psychology breaks down its components into four levels to analyze its effects more systematically (see Figure 2; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). To take seriously the role of social class contexts, as a first step, it is critical to attend to the material and social conditions of the contexts that people participate in (e.g., access to financial resources, neighborhoods, socialization). As a second step, one must consider how participating in these contexts shapes psychological tendencies and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture.

**Figure 2.**

*The Four Interacting Levels of Culture*

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*Note*. Adapted from “Understanding Culture Clashes and Catalyzing Change: A Culture Cycle Approach” by M. Y. G. Hamedani and H. R. Markus, 2019, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 700. (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00700). Copyright 2019 by Hamedani and Markus.

To highlight why it is critical to analyze social class differences across the four levels of culture, consider the following question about a commonly observed social class difference in behavior: Why do people in lower-class contexts display the behavioral tendency to conform to the rules more often than people in higher-class contexts? To answer this question, consider the impact of focusing exclusively on one level of culture–in this case, the idea level. This level would point to the commonly held beliefs about rule-following among people in lower-class contexts: that being a good person means following the rules and deferring to others. However, with a single-level focus (different ideas), the observation of social class difference would lead to two potential misunderstandings. First, this single-level focus would obscure the full contextual sources of this difference and could thereby lead to the erroneous inference that the value of conformity is an essential characteristic of working-class people. Second, this focus would render invisible the interacting levels of culture that work together to maintain and reproduce these social class differences.

Going beyond this single-level focus, our social-class-in-context perspective would consider how each of the four levels of culture interact to afford and maintain conformity. After considering the belief that being a good person means following the rules (at the idea level), our perspective would consider how this idea manifests and reinforces itself across the 3 other levels (see Figure 2). A shift to the institution level would point to ways in which schools in lower-class contexts reflect and promote the value of following the rules. These schools, which have fewer financial resources, have larger class sizes and therefore often offer less individualized attention to each student. Moreover, they are often designed with the goal of preparing students for blue-collar jobs (e.g., working in a factory), and, therefore, rely on curricular and pedagogical practices designed to instill conformity (Kohn & Schooler, 1969; 1973). Next, a shift to interactions would emphasize the ways in which interactions with others (e.g., teachers and family) reinforce the value of following the rules (Anyon, 1980; Lareau, 2003; MacLeod, 2009). For example, when children tell stories that are factually incorrect, parents in lower-class contexts tend to correct their children and tell them they are wrong far more often than parents in higher-class contexts (Miller & Sperry, 1987; 2012; Miller et al., 2005). Through these interactions, teachers and parents seek to protect children from environments that have greater risks and uncertainty, and further, prepare them for the types of roles and occupations that they are most likely to attain in the future. Next, moving to the individual level, people who participate in working-class contexts will be more likely to engage in behavior that reflects this emphasis on following the rules, avoiding risks, and cooperating with others (e.g., Stephens et al., 2007). These social class differences at the individual level, in turn, continue to reinforce and sustain the value of conformity at the other three levels that afforded it.

This analysis reveals the insights that emerge from a multilevel approach. Compared to the single-level analysis described above, considering all four interacting levels provides a much more complete and detailed understanding of how social class differences are created. Understanding social class as a product of multiple, reinforcing levels offers at least two key insights. First, this multilevel framework reveals that social class differences are created in a system that tilts toward maintaining and reproducing itself in the absence of intervention. Second, this framework highlights why social class divides (e.g., in health or education) can be so hard to reduce, especially when intervention efforts frequently rely on “silver bullet” solutions that target only one level of culture (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Indeed, this multilevel understanding suggests the need for interventions that address and catalyze change at multiple levels (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Stephens et al., 2021). For example, an intervention that provides universal basic income or micro-loans would offer more freedom and control for individuals, paving the way for changes in behavior, such as taking charge by starting a new business, planning for the future, and making sound investments in subsequent opportunities. However, these types of change in behavior persist only if they are supported and maintained across the other three levels of culture (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Stephens et al., 2012). For example, powerful cultural ideas (e.g., in the media) need to convey that “good” people invest in their futures; these ideas need to be reinforced through interactions with family and friends who value planning and taking charge; *and* these ideas and interactions would need support from institutions that provide valuable information and material resources (see Thomas et al., 2020).

**Glossary of Terms**

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| **Term** | **Definition** |
| **Power** | The ability to influence others by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments. |
| **Status** | The esteem, respect, or value accorded from others. |
| **Social class** | A social category that is based on the material and social conditions of the contexts people inhabit--including educational attainment, financial resources, and occupations–that rank people in a hierarchy by assigning different levels of power and status. |
| **Sociocultural contexts** | Historically and socially constructed environments that shape psychology and behavior in culture-specific ways. |
| **Social class contexts** | A type of sociocultural context that differs in material and social conditions (including financial resources, educational attainment, and occupation) and psychological affordances (including power and status) of those conditions. These contexts afford the different psychological tendencies and behaviors associated with social class. |
| **Four levels of culture** | Ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals are the four sites of social class differences that must be considered to understand how social class shapes psychology and behavior. |

## Operationalizing Social Class

Although we conceptualize social class as a social category that is created by participation in social class contexts, scholars in the field of social psychology have measured and labeled social class groups in myriad ways. The research we review in this article often uses divergent measures and terms to refer to people in different social class contexts. For example, some research relies on one relatively objective indicator of social class, such as educational attainment, and refers to people who have attained a high school level of education as participating in working-class contexts and people who have attained a four-year degree as participating in middle-class contexts (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). Other research focuses on subjective social class, uses a composite of objective and/or subjective indicators, or manipulates the experience of social class, and based on these measures, refers to people as higher- or lower-class (e.g., Belmi et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2011; Piff et al., 2010).

In this chapter, we rely on overarching terms to organize these diverse measures and terms. Specifically, to broadly demarcate contexts on the top half vs. bottom half of the social class divide, we refer to people in *higher-class* versus *lower-class* contexts. By contrast, when people were raised in different social class contexts, but currently inhabit the same contexts (e.g., a university setting), we refer to people as from *higher-class backgrounds* versus *lower-class backgrounds*. We intentionally avoid the terms higher- or lower-class *people* because social class is not an essential feature or characteristic of individuals. When researchers refer to higher-class *people*, this term suggests an essentialist view of social class that obscures the role of the social class contexts in which those people participate. Instead, by referring to “people in higher- or lower-class contexts,” we suggest that social class is inextricably linked to and produced through participation in social class contexts.

By adopting this terminology–people in social class contexts, we do not mean to suggest that all people who have participated in a social class context have the same experiences; instead, we use this language as a shorthand for characterizing the set of material and social conditions that people in different environments are likely to be exposed to on average. Moreover, by focusing on contexts, we seek to emphasize that the effects of social class on psychology and behavior are malleable and will change with sufficient exposure to new contexts with different material and social conditions. Although we focus on the contexts that create social class, we and other social psychological scholars nevertheless measure social class at an individual level (e.g., by measuring educational attainment or income). This approach assumes that these individual measures provide insight into and serve as a proxy for the material and social conditions of social class contexts.

# Historical Overview

Social psychology strives to understand the situational factors that influence psychology and behavior. Yet, compared to fields such as sociology, social psychology has been slow to recognize the central role of social class. In the past 10-15 years, this trend has shifted: the field of social psychology now dedicates significant attention to the topic of social class. A PsycINFO search using the search terms of “social class” and “socioeconomic status” illustrates the magnitude and time course of this shift. As shown in Figure 2, from 1970 to 2000, research on social class was largely nonexistent–and it was even more absent prior to 1970 (the starting point of Figure 2).[[4]](#footnote-4) Around 2005, a notable shift occurred: the field witnessed a significant uptick in work on social class, followed by a proliferation of interest from 2012 to the present.

We consider the historical context of the United States–as a key site of social class research–that can help account for this increased interest. The newfound attention to social class (from 2005 until the present) has occurred alongside the skyrocketing levels of income inequality, plummeting opportunities for social mobility, and a questioning of cherished ideals, such as the value of hard work and the idea of a “land of opportunity” (Wolak & Peterson, 2020). For example, in 2011, Occupy Wallstreet mobilized people in response to these reduced opportunities with the widely popularized slogan “we are the 99%” (Greene, 2011).

Consider how the conditions of social class contexts–and the opportunities they afford–shifted from the 1930’s until the early 2000’s when social psychology adopted social class as a core topic. During the time period of the 1950’s, many men in lower-class contexts–especially White men–were able to enjoy relative job security and make a decent living (Cherlin, 2014). That security for people in lower-class contexts disappeared in the 1970s and 1980s with increased automation and offshoring of jobs in the manufacturing sector. As a result, people in lower-class contexts had access to fewer jobs, lower earnings, and less job stability (Cherlin, 2014).

During these widespread societal and economic changes, scholars in social psychology have increasingly turned their attention to social class. This shift has been accompanied by two meaningful changes in how scholars approach the topic. First, scholars have moved away from conducting research that treats social class as incidental to research that is deeply theoretical. For example, some early studies used social class as one lens through which to study person perception (e.g., Kraut & Poe, 1980), but in this research, there was no theory of how social class shaped psychology and behavior more generally. It wasn’t until recent years that scholars have developed social psychological theories of social class. Second, in considering social class differences, research has shifted from focusing on just the individual level of culture to a multilevel focus across all four levels of culture.

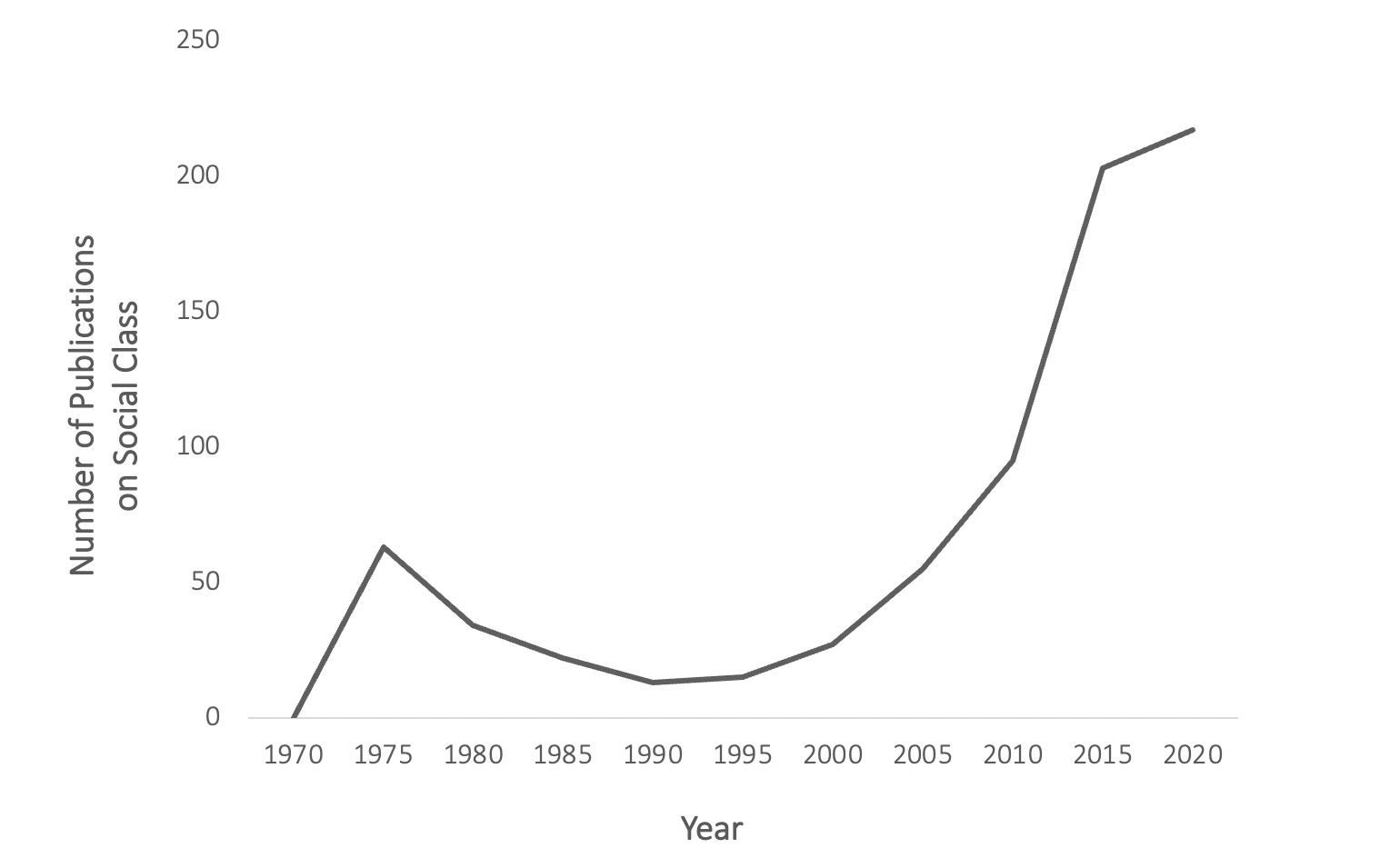
In this section, we provide an overview of four waves of research on social class within the field of social psychology. This overview is not a comprehensive review, but rather a means of highlighting key characteristics of each wave, as well as notable papers that catalyzed major shifts from one wave to the next. Table 1 provides an overview of the four waves and some of the most common research topics within each. The story begins with a *Deficit Focus* wave (1930 – 1993), before turning to a *Psychosocial Influence* wave (1994 – 2004), a *Building the Theoretical Foundation* wave(2005 – 2011), and finally landing on the most recent *Proposing and Testing Theories* wave(2012 – 2022).

**Table 1.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Wave** | **Time Period** | **Common Topics of Research** |
| Deficit Focus | 1930 - 1993 | * Deficits in individual traits (e.g., intelligence, IQ) * Life outcomes * Incidental topics (e.g., stereotyping and prejudice, person perception) |
| Psychosocial Influences | 1994 - 2004 | * Classism, prejudice, and intergroup interactions * Health and well-being |
| Building the Theoretical Foundation | 2005 - 2011 | * Culture and agency * Self and identity * Contextualist thinking, emotion, and empathic accuracy * Academic interventions * Health and well-being |
| Proposing and Testing Theories | 2012 - present | * Decision-making * Prosocial behavior * Cultural mismatch theory * Close relationships * Social mobility * Academic interventions * Health and well-being |

**Figure 3**.

*New Social Psychological Publications on Social Class Every 5 Years Since 1970, as Indicated by PsycINFO*



## Deficit (1930 – 1993)

The early 20th century marks the beginning of social class research within the field of social psychology and catalyzed the beginning of what we term the *Deficit* wave.[[5]](#footnote-5) This first wave adopted either a *deficit approach* to social class research; or took an *incidental* *approach*, treating social class as tangential to the primary research question.

Research with a deficit focus starts from the premise that people in lower-class contexts have worse outcomes (e.g., in school) due to supposed inadequacies in skills or abilities (e.g., lower IQ). This research then explains these worse outcomes in terms of individual attributes, rather than structural barriers. For instance, papers considered correlations between social class and intelligence (Jensen, 1968), intellectual motivation (Lloyd & Barenblatt, 1984), and educational persistence and achievement (Battle, 1965; Maruyama et al., 1981). Some work in this wave also focused on how social class shapes life outcomes, pointing to links between lower-class contexts and stressful or undesirable life events (Dohrenwend, 1973; McLeod & Kessler, 1990), as well as delinquent behavior (Stephenson & White, 1968).

In this Deficit wave, there were additional studies that did not take a deficit approach but that included the topic of social class as a secondary focus. This line of research relegated social class as incidental to the core research questions and not central to the theorizing. In other words, social class was used as an example context in which to study topics such as stereotypes (Darley & Gross, 1983; Morgan, 1982; Smedley & Bayton, 1978) or person perception (Kraut & Poe, 1980; Stewart et al., 1985). Moreover, much of the early work in this wave documented social class differences in psychological constructs but did not point to mechanisms that might explain them. An interest in mechanisms became more pronounced in the next wave, focused on psychosocial influences.

## Psychosocial Influence (1994 – 2004)

The next wave, which we term the *Psychosocial Influence* wave, began in 1994 when Adler and colleagues published a paper investigating the mechanisms that link social class to health outcomes. In this work, social class came more sharply into focus as a central topic of study, and researchers took a more psychosocial orientation to this work. Specifically, they transitioned from the basic assumption of the Deficit wave–that deficits characterize people in lower-class contexts–to a focus on the role of people’s interpretations of the situations that shape health outcomes. In other words, this wave continued to focus on the individual level of the social class culture cycle, but also began to incorporate the idea and interaction levels.

Research in this wave began to unpack the psychological experiences that explain how social class shapes well-being and health outcomes (Adler & Snibbe, 2003; Chen, 2004; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). For example, research often explored how subjective interpretation of one’s experience in a given situation could foster stress and ultimately contribute to worse health outcomes. Further reflecting this psychosocial focus, research also began to examine how social class interacts with specific social situations, daily life experiences, and interactions with others. For instance, this wave featured a new focus on classism, prejudice, and intergroup interactions (Blascovich et al., 2001; Croizet & Claire, 1998; Kay & Jost, 2003).

This wave foreshadowed two of the shifts that emerged in the subsequent wave. First, research on social class included some of the first studies documenting how social class achievement gaps could be reduced by describing tests as nondiagnostic of students’ intellectual abilities (Croizet & Claire, 1998). This work contributed to interventions that became a focus of research in the next two waves. Second, researchers developed theories on power that planted the seeds for theoretical perspectives on social class (Keltner et al., 2003). This perspective built the foundation for the social-cognitive theoretical approach that researchers began to develop in the next wave. The focus thus shifted from mechanisms and the situations that shape outcomes associated with social class to include all four levels of culture (ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals).

## Building the Theoretical Foundation (2005 – 2011)

The next wave, which we term *Building the Theoretical Foundation*, began with the publication of Snibbe and Markus (2005). This article is perhaps the first to consider how social class contexts shape cultural models of self and associated patterns of psychological functioning and behavior. More broadly, this wave was the first in which research fully incorporated all four levels of culture, spanning ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals. Research during this time extended the Psychosocial Influencewave’s focus on the subjective interpretation of situations to incorporate a broader focus on sociocultural contexts. In doing so, this wave built the foundation for the more comprehensive theories of social class that would follow.

Whereas previous waves primarily viewed lower-class contexts as a cause of negative outcomes (e.g., lower well-being and health), this wave conceptualized social class as a central, organizing force that could explain psychological functioning and behavior more generally. The American Psychological Association’s 2007 Task Force on Socioeconomic Status both catalyzed and reflected this shift in thinking. The taskforce clarified the importance of understanding social class for psychologists and outlined recommendations for attenuating social class inequality. It also called for “improv[ing] the quality and impact of psychological research on SES and social class” and “increasing funding opportunities for researchers interested in a wide range of issues related to SES/social class” (p. 27).

This wave featured two key developments. First, it continued the interest from the first two waves in linking social class to health and well-being outcomes (Cutler et al., 2007; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Howell & Howell, 2008; Johnson & Krueger, 2006; Miller et al., 2009). This work focused on both physical and psychological health and continued the emphasis from the Psychosocial Influence wave in examining situational mechanisms linking social class to these outcomes.

Second, this wave laid the groundwork for the two primary theories of how social class shapes psychology and behavior: social-cognitive and sociocultural. Foreshadowing the social-cognitive theory of social class, which we describe in the next section, researchers became increasingly interested in how people in lower-class contexts engage in more contextualist ways of thinking. For instance, research examined how people in lower-class contexts make more contextual explanations (Kraus et al., 2009), demonstrate greater empathic accuracy (Kraus et al., 2010; Kraus, Horberg, et al., 2011), and exhibit more prosocial behavior (Piff et al., 2010).

In tandem with the emergence of the social-cognitive approach, researchers began planting the seeds for the sociocultural approach to studying social class. Specifically, they began to investigate how social class shapes culture, agency, and the self, and in turn, how these dynamics affect psychological functioning and behavior (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). This work laid the groundwork for the sociocultural theory that we describe in the subsequent section. In addition, researchers examined constructs like identity, possible selves, and belonging (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2007); and used these theories to design interventions that sought to reduce social class achievement gaps (Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2006). Much of this research focused on the institution level by emphasizing the role of educational contexts.

## Proposing and Testing Theories (2012 - 2022)

The year 2012 was a watershed moment for research in social class and marked the beginning of the *Proposing and Testing Theories* wave. This wave began with papers on social-cognitive theory (Kraus et al., 2012) and sociocultural theory (Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012) --the two major social psychological theories of how social class shapes psychology and behavior. In addition, the Proposing and Testing Theories wave experienced a marked increase in new areas of research on social class, such as intersectionality, interventions, and links between social class and close relationships (Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Carey & Markus, 2017; Emery & Le, 2014; Masarik et al., 2016; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Yeager et al., 2016).

The three waves of research that preceded this time period built the foundation for the two major theories that emerged during this wave. Social-cognitive theory explains psychology and behavior by focusing on the role of rank and resources, which afford different opportunities for behavior. This theory focused on social class differences in prosocial behavior (Piff, Stancato, Côté, et al., 2012; Stellar et al., 2012), coping with uncertainty (Piff, Stancato, Martinez et al., 2012), morality (Côté et al., 2012; Kraus & Keltner, 2013), and signals of social class (Kraus, Torrez, Park, & Ghayebi, 2019). By contrast, sociocultural theory focuses on the chronic material and social conditions available in social class contexts, which afford different models of self. Research from the sociocultural theoretical perspective investigated the role of cultural mismatch in schools and workplaces (Dittmann et al., 2020; Phillips, Stephens et al., 2020; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend & Dittmann, 2019), as well as how institutions create and maintain social class cultural differences (Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014). This wave saw both theoretical papers from these two perspectives and empirical work investigating their predictions.

At the same time, two more theories of social class, which were less general and instead domain-specific, emerged during this time. Scarcity theory focused on how limited financial resources affects financial decision-making (Shah et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2018). For instance, work from the scarcity perspective finds that thoughts about money are more readily activated for people in lower social class contexts (Shah et al., 2018). Shift-and-persist theory (Chen & Miller, 2012) focused on understanding the links between social class and health, following the interest in health and well-being that continued from previous waves (Brody et al., 2013; Diener et al., 2010; Fuller-Rowell et al., 2012; Ward & King, 2016). For example, research showed that people from lower social class backgrounds are buffered from adverse health outcomes if they experienced a warm family environment growing up (Chen et al., 2011). Unlike the social-cognitive and sociocultural theories, which span multiple levels of analysis and make theoretical predictions relevant to a range of contexts, these theories make predictions specific to financial decisions and health, respectively.

This wave also marked a rise in interventions designed to close social class achievement gaps (Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Hernandez et al., 2021; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Yeager et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers examined social class in new domains, such as close relationships (Emery & Finkel, 2022; Ross et al., 2018; Trail & Karney, 2012) and perceptions of social mobility and system justification (Browman, Destin, Carswell, & Svoboda, 2017; Davidai, 2018; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Phillips & Lowery, 2020; Piff et al., 2020). Finally, more research incorporated intersectional perspective (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2017; Harackiewicz et al., 2016), especially examining the nexus of social class and race.

## *Summary*

Throughout the history of research on social class, social psychology has transitioned from a focus on deficits among people in lower-class contexts to theoretical approaches that seek to understand, more broadly, how social class shapes psychological functioning and behavior. Each wave introduced new topics of inquiry, as well as continuing focal threads of research, such as links between social class and health and well-being outcomes. Over time, the levels of analysis moved beyond a focus on individuals to consider all four levels of culture–ideas, institutions, interactions, *and* individuals. The final wave saw the development of two major theoretical perspectives on social class–social-cognitive theory and sociocultural theory. In the next section, we describe in detail the primary two theoretical approaches to social class.

# Two Theoretical Perspectives on Social Class

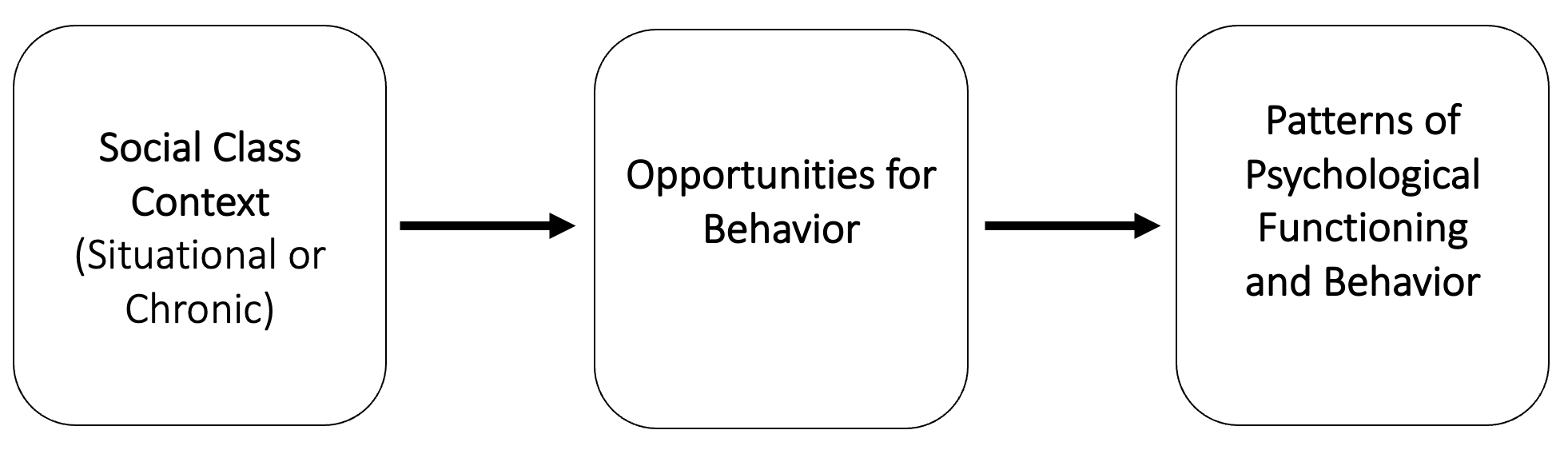
This section describes the two most influential theoretical perspectives on social class in the field of social psychology: social-cognitive and sociocultural. We begin by outlining the basic tenets of the two main theories, followed by an overview of where they diverge from each other. Our rationale for focusing on these two theories is twofold. First, they are broad social psychological theoretical perspectives that seek to explain the relationship between social class and psychological functioning and behavior.[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, most of the social psychological research that we review below is guided by these two theories.

## Social-Cognitive Theory

The social-cognitive theory of social class focuses on how social class rank and exposure to material resources shape psychological functioning and behavior. This theory defines *social class rank* as perceptions of rank relative to others and *material resources* as education, income, and occupational status. According to Kraus and colleagues (2019): “social cognitive patterns can emerge based on the chronic exposure to environments of high (or low) resources and perceived rank, or through temporary exposure to these features of the social environment” (p. 726). As shown in Figure 3, this theory examines how rank and material resources create particular social class contexts. These contexts, in turn, provide different opportunities for behavior, which afford particular patterns of psychological functioning and behavior.

Specifically, rank (i.e., subjective perceptions relative to others) defines the context by shaping chronic perceptions of one’s standing in the community or in society more broadly, whereas material resources create the social class context by providing access to valuable services and goods. When rank is elevated and resources are abundant, they create a context that protects people from environmental threats and creates opportunities for individual action. For instance, many individual actions–such as hiring a lawyer to protect one’s rights or moving to a new neighborhood with higher quality schools–are only possible with sufficient rank and resources. These opportunities for individual action foster a more individualistic orientation to the environment, one that is oriented toward individual goals, rewards, and internal states. For example, reflecting this individual orientation, people in higher-class contexts more often rely on dispositional attributions to explain others’ behavior (e.g., money management skills or hard work; Kraus et al., 2009). Conversely, diminished rank and scarce resources create a social class context that leads to more frequent environmental threats and fewer opportunities for individual-focused behavior. Indeed, without an economic safety net, an unexpected event (e.g., a car breaking down) could block an individual from pursuing their long-term goals, and instead require relying on and working together with others. These conditions foster a more external orientation to the environment, one that is oriented toward responding to external constraints, threats, and other people (Kraus et al. 2011; 2012; 2019). Instead of relying on dispositional or individual-focused attributions, people in lower-class contexts rely on more contextual attributions that recognize the role of the situation in constraining what is possible (e.g., educational opportunity or the economic structure of society; Kraus et al., 2009).

**Figure 3.**



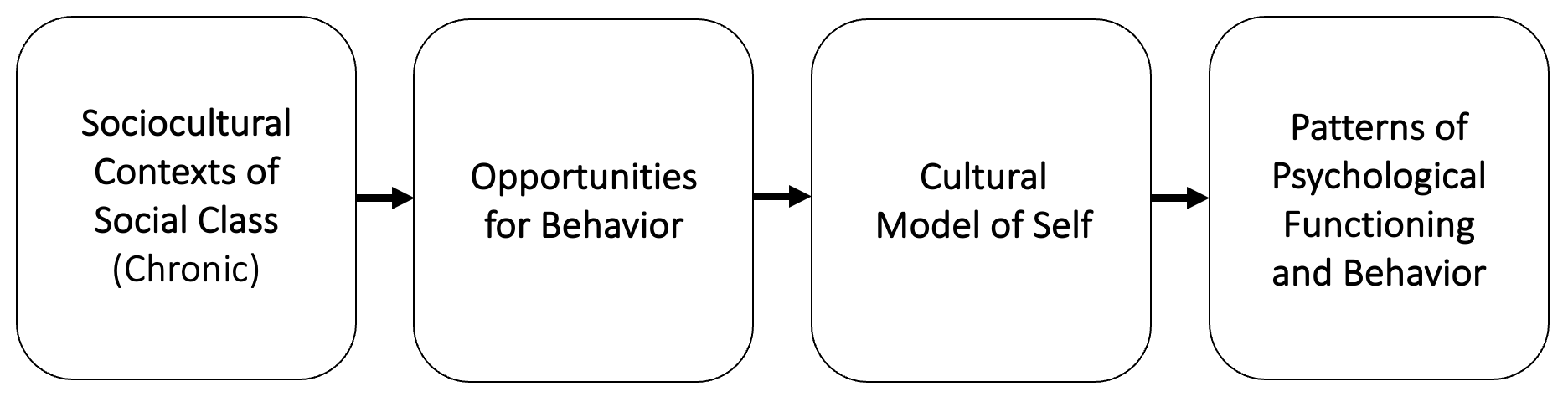
## Sociocultural Theory

Like social-cognitive theory, sociocultural theory seeks to explain how social class contexts–which vary in material and social conditions and psychological affordances–shape psychological functioning and behavior. As shown in Figure 4, sociocultural theory focuses on how the chronic effects of social class contexts provide particular opportunities for behavior. Engaging with these different opportunities for behavior means that individuals in lower-class and higher-class contexts develop different *models of self.* These models of self afford particular patterns of psychological functioning and behavior (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). From this perspective, social class contexts are not the same everywhere; instead, they intersect with and are always situated in relation to other sociocultural contexts, such as nation of origin. Ultimately, these intersections shape the particular ways in which social class contexts guide psychological functioning and behavior.

Lower-class contexts are characterized by material and social conditions that encourage people to adjust and respond to the needs and preferences of others. For example, low levels of financial resources, coupled with corresponding limited opportunities for choice, influence, and control, mean that people need to rely on others for material support and assistance. Therefore, what others think and feel becomes more central to one's own ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. As a result of enacting these other-focused behaviors over time, people in lower-class contexts tend to develop a more *interdependent model of self–*an understanding of the self as connected to others and the social context. For example, reflecting a more interdependent self, students from lower-class (vs. higher-class) backgrounds are often motivated to attend higher education to help their families or communities (Stephens et al., 2012). This model of self, in turn, affords relational or other-focused patterns of psychological functioning and behavior (e.g., choices that reflect a preference for connection to others; Stephens et al.,2007). This process of socialization is one that “continually transforms [...] constraints into preferences” (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, many Hurricane Katrina survivors from lower-class contexts were constrained in their behavior–that is, they were unable to evacuate prior to the storm, but their experience of repeated constraints also meant that many survivors preferred to stay with family, consistent with interdependent values.

In contrast, higher-class contexts are characterized by material and social conditions that encourage people to focus on and prioritize their individual desires, preferences, and interests. For example, abundant financial resources, coupled with opportunities for choice, influence and control, make it possible to act without needing others’ material support, and therefore, to pave one’s own path. As a result of enacting these behaviors over time, people in higher-class contexts tend to develop a more *independent model of self*–an understanding of self as separate from others and the social context. For example, reflecting a more independent model of self, students from higher-class backgrounds are often motivated to attend higher education to pave their own paths and develop their own individual selves. This independent model, in turn, affords individual or self-focused patterns of psychological functioning and behavior (e.g., choices that express uniqueness and differentiate the self from others; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens et al., 2007).

**Figure 4.**

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## Comparing Social-Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories

There are four key differences between the two major theories of social class: (1) the focus on situational versus chronic social class; (2) whether the effects of social class are regarded as specific to the sociocultural context; (3) the theorized mediating process between social class and psychological functioning and behavior; and (4) the emphasis on different levels of culture.

First, the two theories have different approaches to conceptualizing social class. While social-cognitive theory focuses on both the situational and chronic effects of social class, sociocultural theory focuses exclusively on the chronic effects of social class. By attending to situational effects, social-cognitive theory lends itself to controlled experiments in the laboratory that temporarily induce the experience of higher or lower subjective social class (Kraus et al., 2010). For example, participants are typically presented with a ladder with 10 rungs “representing where people stand in the United States,” and then asked to either compare themselves to those at the very top (i.e., a lower-class condition) or those at the very bottom (i.e., a higher-class condition; Kraus et al., 2010; p. 1720). Based on this conceptualization, this theory is especially well suited to explaining temporary or situational shifts in the effects of social class. For example, social-cognitive theory could more readily explain why a person in a lower-class context would temporarily exhibit self-focused psychological tendencies after receiving a year-end bonus at work.

In contrast, by focusing on the chronic effects of social class, sociocultural theory does not allow for experimental manipulations of social class. It is instead better suited to explaining cultural differences in norms and patterns of socialization that shape people’s behavior across contexts. For example, sociocultural theory could more readily point to the socialization processes that help explain why a parent from a higher-class context would demand that a teacher provide more individualized attention for their child (Kusserow, 1999; Lareau, 1987; 2003). This focus on socialization would reveal that parents in higher-class contexts are more likely to regard children as unique and special individuals who require individualized attention to reach their full potential (Kusserow, 1999; Lareau, 1987; 2003). Reflecting this sentiment, in depth interviews with mothers and teachers in a higher-class context revealed that “raising an individualistic child was akin to gently assisting the child in emerging, unfolding, flowering, and self-actualizing his or her own unique qualities, thoughts, and feelings” (Kusserow, 1999; p. 223).

Second, the two theories have different views on whether social class has context-specific effects across cultures. According to social-cognitive theory, rank and resources should have similar effects on psychology and behavior across contexts (Kraus et al., 2012). That is, the effects of rank and resources are viewed as basic features of the context that should facilitate behavior in similar ways, irrespective of the national sociocultural context. This would suggest that, on average, a four-year degree, an occupation as a doctor, or a $200,000 income would have similar psychological and behavioral effects in all countries across the globe. Supporting this theorizing, there is some research that documents similar effects of social class across different national contexts (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Miyamoto, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2018). For example, research across 60 different nations has shown that, on average, higher social class is associated with stronger endorsement of self-oriented psychological attributes (e.g., self-esteem) and self-oriented socialization values (e.g., independence; Miyamoto, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2018). Likewise, social class has consistent effects on cognition in both the United States (an independent context) and Russia (an interdependent context). In both countries, lower-class contexts were associated with a more interdependent self, and, therefore, more holistic cognition (e.g., more attention to the social context, less dispositional bias; Grossmann & Varnum, 2011).

However, according to sociocultural theory, the effects of social class on psychology and behavior hinge not only on the conditions of social class contexts (e.g., financial resources), but also on their intersection with other meaningful sociocultural contexts. As noted above, social class contexts are one type of a sociocultural context, and they intersect with other sociocultural contexts, such as nation of origin, gender, or race. These other intersecting sociocultural contexts are theorized to lend culture-specific meanings to the material and social conditions (e.g., a $200,000 income) of the social class contexts people inhabit. These meanings, in turn, play a key role in shaping how social class shapes psychology and behavior. Therefore, this theory would predict that the effects of a four-year degree, an occupation as a doctor, or a $200,000 income would show some cultural differences across the United States and Japan. For example, in contrast to the typical link between social class and self-focus, specific comparisons across the United States and Japan have shown that higher-class contexts in Japan are associated with higher other-oriented psychological attributes (e.g., sympathy) and socialization values (e.g., feelings of responsibility (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Indeed, there is growing evidence that some of the effects of social class are context-specific (e.g., Blader & Chen, 2012; Cohen et al., 2017; Kopelman, 2009; Torelli et al., 2020; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010; Zhong et al., 2006).

Third, although both social-cognitive and sociocultural theories make similar predictions about how social class shapes psychology and behavior, they suggest different mediating processes. As noted above, social-cognitive theory identifies different opportunities for behavior as the key mechanism that explains why people in different social class contexts exhibit different psychological and behavioral tendencies (see Figure 3). In contrast, sociocultural theory focuses on different models of self as the mediating mechanism (see Figure 4). For example, to explain why people in lower-class contexts frequently make contextual attributions, social-cognitive theory would suggest that this is because environmental threats limit the opportunity to attend to individual attributes of a person and instead orient one’s attention to the context. Sociocultural theory would further claim that interdependent selves, common in lower-class contexts, afford an understanding of the self as connected to and responsive to the context, and, therefore, orient a person to contextual attributions.

Like social-cognitive theory, sociocultural theory would recognize that people have different opportunities for behavior. However, sociocultural theory would take more of a chronic perspective to theorize about how different opportunities for behavior over time foster different models of self.

Fourth, although both theories focus on multiple levels of the culture cycle, they emphasize different levels of culture. Social-cognitive theory focuses more on the individual level–and less on the institution level–than sociocultural theory (e.g., Piff & Moskowitz, 2018; Kraus et al., 2009). Much of the research conducted from a social-cognitive approach has examined how individual-level social class differences in psychology and behavior can scale up to reproduce social class inequality more broadly in society. By contrast, sociocultural theory draws on a tradition of research in cultural psychology, which theorizes about models of self as shaped by–and shapers of–the four levels of social class context. This theory, therefore, has more of a multilevel focus that spans both individual and institution levels (e.g., analyses of magazine ads, cultural mismatch theory; e.g., Stephens et al., 2007; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

Both social-cognitive and sociocultural theory shape much of the existing literature on social class within social psychology. In our review of the literature below, we use the four levels of the social class context as an organizing framework. Drawing from insights across these theoretical perspectives, we propose that fully understanding the relationship between social class and psychological functioning and behavior requires attending to all four levels of the social class context.

# Social Class Contexts Shape Psychology and Behavior at Four Levels of Culture

In the sections that follow, we review the social class literature in social psychology. We organize these sections based on the four levels of culture at which social class contexts shape psychology and behavior: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals. As we describe in detail below, social class contexts shape culture-specific ideas–for example, whether people view themselves as independent and distinct or as inherently connected to others and the social context (Stephens et al., 2007; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). These foundational ideas, in turn, guide how people engage with and respond to institutions–for example, the degree to which they navigate higher education settings with a sense of ownership, entitlement, and empowerment (Cote et al., 2020). These foundational ideas further shape social class differences in how people interact with others–for example, whether people prioritize loyalty and solidarity in their closest relationships (Carey & Markus, 2017). Finally, these ideas guide how individuals think, feel, and act–for example, whether people are more prosocial and donate time and money or whether they are instead more self-interested (Korndorfer et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010; Whillans et al., 2017).

## Ideas

We first review how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the idea level of culture. By *ideas* we mean widely shared, historically derived assumptions about what is good, moral, natural, real, and necessary (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). We first examine how social class contexts afford different cultural ideas that manifest in models of self. Second, we review how social class contexts afford particular ideas about ethics or morality. Finally, we consider lay theories of social class—or ideas about what social class is and where it comes from.

### Models of Self

Social class contexts afford different cultural models of self and agency. All people, even those who regard themselves as independent from or unaffected by their contexts, have models of self and agency that are socioculturally shaped or patterned. The term *cultural models of self* refers to implicit understandings of oneself in relation to others and the social context (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). The term *models of agency* is meant to refer broadly to one’s understanding not just of the self but also more general understandings of behavior and “how to be” a person in the world (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Although the term *models of agency* is meant to convey a broader set of understandings than *models of self*, research on social class often uses them interchangeably. In the sections that follow, we therefore refer to these understandings of both self and agency as *models of self*.

To say that selves and agency are socioculturally patterned is to say that social class contexts with different material and social conditions afford different ways of being a self and acting in the world. Decades of social and cultural psychological research has identified two common models of self that guide norms for how people think, feel, and act (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). An *independent* model of self assumes that the normatively appropriate person should influence the context, be separate or distinct from other people, and act freely based on personal motives, goals, and preferences (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). This way of understanding the self and what it means to be a “good” person is associated with a constellation of self-oriented psychological tendencies and behaviors (Adams et al., 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, a person guided by this model will be more likely to make dispositional attributions and display analytic cognitive patterns (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Kraus et al., 2009), view relationships as volitional or based on personal choices (Carey & Markus, 2017), emphasize personal control, choice, influence, and a promotion and future-oriented focus (Stephens et al., 2007).

In contrast, an *interdependent* model of self assumes that the normatively appropriate person should adjust to the conditions of the context, be connected to others, and respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others. Just as the independent model sets up a blueprint or template for appropriate behavior, so too does the interdependent model. This way of understanding the self is associated with a constellation of other-focused psychological tendencies and behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, a person guided by this model will be more likely to make situational attributions and to display holistic cognitive patterns (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Kraus et al., 2009), view relationships as enduring and permanent (Carey & Markus, 2017), emphasize solidarity and compassion for others, and have a present-oriented focus (e.g., Stephens et al., 2007).

Research on how social class shapes models of self has roots in sociological research that showed how inequality could shape the selves that people have the opportunity to become. For example, classic sociological work in the 1960’s showed that jobs available in lower-class contexts enable less choice, control, and self-direction than those in higher-class contexts, and therefore foster more conformity and less self-direction (Kohn, 1963; Pearlin & Kohn, 1966; Sennett & Cobb, 1993). Research characterized these differences in self-direction as follows: “Insofar as [people] are free of close supervision, do complex work with data or with people, and work at complexly organized tasks, their work is necessarily self-directed. And insofar as they are subject to close supervision, work with things, and work at simply organized tasks, their work does not permit self-direction" (Kohn & Schooler, 1969; p. 671). At the same time, ethnographic studies began to document how limited material resources, coupled with abundant environmental constraints, could shape whether and to what extent an individual contemplates individuation and differentiation from their family. Referring to people in lower-class contexts, Lilian Rubin explained: “For them, there is no time for concern about the issues of their own growth and development that so preoccupy the college-educated middle-class youth in this era; no time to wonder who they are, what they will do, how they can differentiate themselves from their parents, how they can stand as separate, autonomous selves” (Rubin, 1976, p. 73).

Building on these insights from sociology, social psychological research has documented how different social class contexts, which differ in material and social conditions, afford different opportunities for behavior and therefore shape people’s cultural models of self. The first social psychological investigation on this topic focused on the centrality of choice to people’s sense of self and agency. This research found that choice was more central to models of self in higher-class compared to lower-class contexts (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). For example, one study found that people in higher-class contexts evaluated pens more positively when they chose the pens themselves (compared to when an experimenter chose for them). Yet, suggesting that choice was less central to their models of self, participants in lower-class contexts evaluated their pens comparably regardless of whether they chose them or not. Not only does the preference for choice differ by social class–so too does the meaning of choice. For people in higher-class contexts, choice is used to express differentiation and uniqueness, whereas for people in lower-class contexts, choice is used to express similarity to and connection with others (Stephens et al., 2007; see also Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). This preference for uniqueness and difference reflected a more independent model of self, whereas the preference for similarity and connection reflected a more interdependent model (see Na et al., 2016).

Building on this initial work focused on choice, many subsequent studies have suggested that lower-class contexts foster a more interdependent model of self, whereas higher-class contexts foster a more independent model of self (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Na et al., 2016; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007; 2009; 2011). Recent research has clarified the particular types of selves that emerge based on experiences in these different social class contexts. Indeed, the selves common in lower-class contexts are characterized by *hard interdependence*, a way of being not only connected with and socially responsive to others, but also self-protective, tough, and strong (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014; Emery & Finkel, 2022). For example, ethnographic interviews with mothers in lower-class contexts showed that hard interdependence was helpful not only for protecting the self from danger or risk, but also for “surviving the rough weather on the way up the socioeconomic ladder” (Kusserow, 1999; p. 229). In contrast, the selves common in higher-class contexts are characterized by *expressive independence*, a way of being focused not only on distinction and separation, but also influence, self-promotion, and self-expression (Stephens et al., 2014). For mothers in higher-class contexts, “the most popular image for the child was that of a delicate flower in the process of blossoming” (Kusserow, 1999; p. 229).

#### Cross-National Differences in Models of Self

Extending research on social class differences in models of self, researchers have investigated whether the prevalent cultural ideas (e.g., independent models of self) embedded in different national sociocultural contexts impact the ways in which social class contexts shape psychology and behavior. Studies show that there are some important differences in the effects of social class across nations.

The cultural ideas embedded in national contexts can shape the ways in which social class guides psychology, producing different effects across national contexts (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Reflecting sociocultural theory, this perspective suggests that the cultural ideas available in a setting attach a distinct set of meanings to being a “good” person or acting in the “right” ways, and thereby inform how the conditions of a context affect behavior (Curhan et al., 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2018). For example, in the United States, although lower-class contexts require that people attend to and respond to others, the cultural ideal at a national level is to be independent. Psychological tendencies in the United States, therefore, tend to reflect this tension between independence and interdependence. This is one reason why hard interdependence is characteristic of lower-class contexts in the United States – people strive to be tough, strong, and self-reliant in this national context that prioritizes independence, but they also need to be interdependent and connected to others to be effective and survive.

Research has documented national differences in the relationship between social class and certain psychological tendencies. For example, individuals in lower-class contexts in the United States tend to express more anger than those in higher-class contexts (Park et al., 2013). In contrast, in Japan, the opposite effect emerges, such that higher-class contexts are linked with greater expression of anger (Park et al., 2013). The researchers theorized that these different patterns emerge because of different national cultural ideas attached to anger. Indeed, in the United States, anger is a socially accepted way to express frustration or a lack of personal control. However, in Japan, anger is more socially acceptable for those who have the most power and status in society–those in higher-class contexts.

### Morality

Since social class contexts shape people’s models of self, it is not surprising that they also shape people’s understanding of morality, moral reasoning, and moral standards. Just as models of self are linked with self- versus other-oriented psychological tendencies, they also provide a template for a morality that focuses on either individual welfare and rights or relational concerns, such as obligations and duties toward others (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt, 2012). Research on moral foundations has identified five key pillars (or foundations) that underlie people’s general conceptions of morality: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity[[7]](#footnote-7) (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). These pillars are classified as focusing on either *individualizing* or *binding* moral foundations. *Individualizing* foundations reflect relatively independent concerns pertaining to the rights and welfare of individuals (harm, care, fairness). *Binding* foundations reflect relatively interdependent or other-focused concerns that bind people together as a group (ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and respect for purity and what is sacred; Haidt, 2008; Joseph et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007).

How do social class contexts shape these moral foundations? Research investigating this question finds that social class differences in endorsement of moral foundations parallel differences in models of agency. That is, reflecting a more independent model of self, people in higher-class contexts endorse a relatively narrow conception of morality, prioritizing individualizing morals, such as harm and care, over binding morals (Carey & Markus, 2017; Haidt et al., 1993; Keltner et al., 2008). In contrast, reflecting a relatively interdependent model, people in lower-class contexts rely on a broader conception of morality that incorporates both individualizing morals and binding morals, such as purity concerns (Horberg et al., 2009).

Building on these differences in moral foundations, research has examined the relationship between social class and unethical behavior. Early research in this area suggested a clear relationship, such that higher social class led to more unethical behavior, for instance, taking candy from children, cheating, or lying (Piff, Stancato, Côté et al., 2012). More recent research, however, shows this relationship is far from straightforward (Trautmann et al., 2013; see also Ding et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020) and emerges only when the unethical behavior is self-interested (e.g., cheating on a game to earn a reward for oneself; Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015). When the unethical behavior is aimed at benefiting others, the pattern reverses, such that people in lower-class contexts engage in more unethical behavior (e.g, cheating on a game to earn a reward for someone else; Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015).

Beyond broad conceptions of what constitutes morality, social class also shapes styles of moral reasoning. Specifically, research shows that people in higher-class contexts are more likely than those in lower-class contexts to rely on utilitarian moral judgements that maximize the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Across studies, research shows that this difference occurs, in part, because people in higher-class contexts are less likely to experience empathy for the individual(s) who would be harmed by the consequences of the utilitarian judgment. For example, in a classic footbridge dilemma, people in higher-class contexts more often choose to push someone off a footbridge to save five people’s lives in contrast to people in lower-class contexts, who more often choose not to push that person off the bridge (Cote et al., 2012).

### Lay Theories of Social Class

Beyond people’s ideas about morality, there is a broad array of cultural ideas that relate to people’s understanding of what social class is and where it comes from. These include the belief in social mobility; lay theories of the origins of social class; explanation of the causes of poverty or inequality (internal or situational); and the stereotypes or ideas that get ascribed to different positions in the social class hierarchy. These beliefs often vary over time and across social class contexts (Cohen et al., 2017). Moreover, they can be resistant to change because they serve a system-justifying function, helping to assuage guilt (for people in higher-class contexts) and maintain motivation to work hard in the face of hardship (for people in lower-class contexts).

#### Beliefs about Social Mobility. Belief in social mobility refers to the notion that people can move up or down the social class ladder based on their individual efforts (e.g., hard work). Reflecting the strength of this belief, people tend to overestimate the amount of social mobility that exists in a given society (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Kraus, 2015). However, there are mixed findings with regards to the relationship between one’s own social class and beliefs in social mobility (e.g., Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015).

What are the causes and consequences of this belief in social mobility? One key psychological factor that affords the belief in mobility is the amount of inequality people perceive to be present in their society. Perceiving lower (vs. higher) levels of inequality supports the belief in mobility because it is linked with more internal attributions for people’s economic outcomes (e.g., ability to take initiative; Davidai, 2018; Browman et al., 2021; see also Browman, Svoboda & Destin, 2019). Other research has examined the consequences of this belief, suggesting that a strong belief in social mobility increases people’s endorsement of meritocracy and belief in a just world, and increases tolerance for inequality (Day & Fiske, 2017; Shariff et al., 2016). In sum, these beliefs about mobility are one part of a network of other system-justifying tendencies, suggesting that maintenance of this belief can help people feel good about themselves and the system in which they participate.

**Essentialist Beliefs.** People not only vary in mobility beliefs; they also vary in related beliefs about the degree to which social class is essential–the view that social class is fixed and biological in origin (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Social class contexts shape endorsement of these beliefs and the function that these beliefs serve. For example, people in higher-class contexts are more likely than people in lower-class contexts to justify the system by endorsing essentialist beliefs about social class (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). For people in higher-class contexts, these beliefs can help maintain a sense of deservingness, justifying one’s privilege and location in the social class hierarchy (see Phillips & Lowery, 2020). For example, the belief in social class essentialism is linked with endorsement of punitiveness and less support for restorative justice (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). In contrast, for people in lower-class contexts, who face relatively more environmental constraints, these types of system-justifying beliefs can serve a different purpose: to maintain motivation and willingness to persist in the face of hardship (Laurin et al., 2011; Jost, 2017). For example, one study showed that, after receiving poor grades, belief in fairness predicted commitment to performing well on the next test, but only among students from lower-class contexts (Laurin et al., 2011).

**Attributions for Poverty.** Just as beliefs in essentialism justify the social class hierarchy, so too do internal attributions for poverty. An internal attribution for poverty emphasizes a characteristic of the person (e.g, explaining poverty as due to people’s work ethic), whereas a situational or contextual explanation emphasizes features of the context or the situation (e.g., explaining poverty as due to a lack of resources). Research suggests that internal attributions serve a system-justifying function because they fuel victim-blaming and therefore decrease people’s concern about inequality and their interest in reducing it (Birnbaum et al., 2022; Piff et al., 2020; see also Stephens et al., 2009). Although dispositional beliefs are resistant to change, large external forces outside of personal control can shift people’s beliefs in a more situational direction. For example, the more that people experienced this loss of personal control–through the experience of personal harm due to the pandemic (e.g., losing a job), the more likely they were to endorse situational attributions for inequality (Birnbaum et al., 2022; see also Wiwad et al., 2021).

**Stereotypes of Social Class.**Stereotypes about social class are another belief system that can help maintain the social class hierarchy. People in lower-class contexts are often stereotyped as lazy and as possessing negative attributes that help justify their lower position in the hierarchy (e.g., stereotyped as drug-abusers; Lindqvist et al., 2017; Loughnan et al., 2014). Moreover, they are also often dehumanized as primitive, bestial, and animalistic (Loughnan et al., 2014). Consistent with the idea of being less than human, they are viewed as feeling less pain than their higher-class counterparts (Summers et al., 2021; 2022).[[8]](#footnote-8) In contrast, people in higher-class contexts are stereotyped as competent and as having various positive attributes (e.g., hard-working, intelligent, healthy; Durante & Fiske, 2017). Although more negative attributes are typically assigned to people in lower-class contexts, social class stereotypes of both groups can also be also ambivalent, such that the rich are viewed as cold, but competent, whereas the poor are generally viewed as warm, but incompetent (Durante et al., 2017).

##### *Summary*. Overall, this section reviewed research focused on how different social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the ideas level of culture. We first reviewed research focused on social class differences in ideas that manifest in models of self. We then considered how social class contexts relate to people’s ideas about morality or what it means to be an ethical person. Finally, we considered how ideas manifest in terms of people’s broad understanding of what social class is, where it comes from, and whether it is subject to change.

## Institutions

As we shift from the idea level of culture to the institution level of culture, it is critical to recognize how the idea level informs the institution level. By *institutions*, we mean organizations or social structures that provide and formalize a set of rules, such as education, the law, the media, religion, markets, science, or the government. One key difference at the idea level is whether models of self reflect norms of independence or interdependence. These ideas about how to be a “good” person are evident not only in individuals’ minds; they also shape the institutions that people create and are reproduced there. For example, the independent ideas prevalent in higher-class contexts translate into educational institutions that prioritize individual achievement as opposed to working together (Dittmann et al., 2020).

The section below focuses on how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the institution level of culture. Because social psychological research on institutions has focused on education, educational institutions are the focus of our review (for an exception, see Belmi & Laurin, 2016).[[9]](#footnote-9) We first describe research that examines how educational institutions can disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds and create social class disparities–both in terms of psychological experience (e.g., a lack of fit) and academic outcomes (e.g., GPA). Then, we provide an overview of research on interventions designed to level the playing field and reduce these social class disparities.

### Educational Institutions Disadvantage Students from Lower-Class Backgrounds

Decades of research in education and sociology documents that educational institutions persistently disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds. For example, college students from lower-class backgrounds receive lower grades, interact less with peers and professors, and drop out at higher rates than students who come from higher-class backgrounds (e.g., Pascarella et al. 2004; Sirin, 2005). This persistent gap in academic experiences, behaviors, and outcomes has been termed the *social class achievement gap*. Multiple, intersecting factors fuel this gap, including structural conditions (e.g., lower quality schools), individual characteristics afforded by structural conditions (e.g., lower self-efficacy), and the psychological experiences (e.g., a lack of fit) that emerge through the ongoing interactions of structures and individuals (Croizet et al., 2017; Dittmann & Stephens, 2017; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). The research reviewed below focuses in particular on the role of psychological experiences.

**Psychological Experiences**. Research in social psychology often focuses on the role of psychological experience—how students make sense of their interactions with their educational institutions (Dittmann & Stephens, 2017; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Walton & Wilson, 2018). Students’ psychological experiences, such as a sense of social fit or empowerment, are important because they impact downstream behavior, such as academic engagement (e.g., attending class or studying; Stephens, Brannon et al., 2015).

#### Early work on social class differences in psychological experience identified *possible selves*–an image of the person one is likely to become in the future–as a critical factor for students’ academic success (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Indeed, in academic settings, possible selves need to connect students’ sense of who they are to the academic environment by incorporating a sense of self as a student. These student-focused possible selves facilitate the types of behaviors that are necessary for academic success (e.g., doing homework, Nurra & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2006). However, students from lower-class backgrounds less often have access to experiences that develop student-focused selves. For example, they less often experience elite educational environments that are designed to elaborate their possible selves as students (Stephens, Markus & Philips, 2014). Moreover, they are less likely to have the behavioral strategies (e.g., how to plan homework for the week) needed to enact these student-focused selves. This disconnect–between the selves that foster academic success and the selves afforded by lower-class backgrounds–disadvantages students from lower-class backgrounds (Oyserman et al., 2006).

More recent work focuses on social class differences in the types of psychological experiences that undermine the social fit or belonging of students from lower-class backgrounds (Ostrove, 2003; Stephens, Brannon et al., 2015). These psychological experiences include stereotype threat (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Croizet & Dutrevis, 2004; Spencer & Castano, 2007) family achievement guilt (i.e., feeling of wrongdoing for one’s personal academic success when one’s family members have not had the same opportunities; Covarrubias et al., 2015; 2020; 2021; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015); financial concerns (Destin & Svoboda, 2018); fears of being rejected based on social class background (Rheinschmidt & Mendoza-Denton, 2014); a lack of integration between “home” and “school” identities (Hermann & Varnum, 2018**;** Herrmann et al., 2021); discomfort in public spaces on campus (Trawalter et al., 2021); and fixed beliefs about academic abilities (Claro et al., 2016; Destin et al., 2019). These social class differences in psychological experience undermine students’ cognitive functioning (e.g., self-regulatory depletion) and their opportunity to succeed in academic environments (Johnson et al., 2011).

**Education-Student Mismatches**. Another research area examines how educational institutions reflect and promote cultural norms common in higher-class contexts, and, in turn, fuel the social class achievement gap. More specifically, people from higher-class contexts have the power and status to build educational institutions in their own image, reflecting their class-specific ideas of what it means to be a “good” student. When students from lower-class backgrounds enter these gateway institutions, the institutions position them as outsiders or as guests in someone else’s house. This experience of exclusion plays a pivotal role in undermining students’ experience of fit and empowerment, and, in turn, their academic outcomes.

A primary form of cultural mismatch stems from the higher-class norms of independence that pervade higher education and contrast with the relatively interdependent norms common in lower-class contexts. Cultural mismatch theory posits that this mismatch undermines the experience of fit and the academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend & Dittmann, 2019). Indeed, when universities prioritize independent cultural values (e.g., messages that proclaim “pave your own path”) or independent cultural practices (e.g., individual assessment), students from lower-class backgrounds feel less fit with the university, earn lower grades, and also perform worse on academic tasks (e.g., anagrams; Dittmann et al., 2020; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). These effects of cultural mismatch on fit and grades do not dissipate as students navigate these institutions over time; instead, they persist over the course of students’ four years in college (Phillips et al., 2020).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Independent norms in educational institutions also promote the idea that students should compete to showcase their skills and stand out. When academic environments prioritize the independent norm of competition, they lead students from lower-class backgrounds, who often prioritize community and collaboration, to feel like imposters, disengage, and perform less well (Canning et al., 2020; Crouzevialle & Darnon, 2019; Smeding et al., 2013). When students do perform in a way that enables them to stand out from their peers, one key benefit is that they are more likely to be selected or chosen for subsequent academic opportunities. Yet, the very idea of selecting the best individual students is also a highly independent idea. Therefore, to the extent that institutions emphasize that education is about selecting the best students, rather than helping students learn, they reproduce social class gaps. More specifically, this focus on selection leads evaluators to judge students from lower-class backgrounds more negatively than their advantaged peers (Batruch et al., 2019).

Beyond setting up expectations for how students should act, these independent norms emphasize that success in education is and should be based primarily on individual merit. Contexts that emphasize this idea focus people on individuals, obscuring the role of contexts or backgrounds in shaping people’s outcomes. These norms can therefore lead people to interpret the social class achievement gap–and any related behavioral differences–as a product of individuals’ skills or lack thereof (Fisher et al., 2017; Goudeau & Cimpian, 2021). When students from lower-class backgrounds have worse academic outcomes than their advantaged higher-class counterparts, as is often the case given the persistent social class achievement gap, they are often seen as deficient. In this context, simply highlighting performance differences in classrooms (e.g., by having students raise their hands) is enough to undermine the academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017).

Although these deficit narratives further fuel and maintain social class disparities in academic outcomes, research has begun to investigate how to shift these deficit-focused narratives. One way of doing so is to instead focus on the background-specific strengths or assets linked to social class. For example, when teachers communicate the value of students’ background-specific strengths, or when students from lower-class backgrounds reflect on their background-specific strengths, these students are more likely to report that they will persist in the face of difficulty and perform better academically (Hernandez et al., 2021; Silverman et al., 2021). Likewise, when students perceive that the university culture actively supports students from lower-class backgrounds, they are more likely to see their backgrounds as a “match” at the university and to report greater self-efficacy and expectations for achievement (Browman & Destin, 2016).

### Social Psychological Interventions Improve the Academic Outcomes of Students from Lower-Class Backgrounds

Just as research on the sources on social class disparities focuses on the psychological obstacles that students face, so too do social psychological interventions address these types of obstacles. Most interventions target how students construe the situation to change their psychological experiences (e.g., social fit), behavior (e.g., seeking resources), and academic performance (e.g., GPAs; Dittmann & Stephens, 2017; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Broadly speaking, as we discuss below, these interventions target (a) how students construe their experience, (b) students' values, and (c) students’ selves and identities.

#### Interventions Targeting Construal. One area of interventions focuses on changing students’ construal of their experience–that is, how they understand adversity or difficulty in college. Indeed, when students from lower-class backgrounds transition to university settings, they often confront challenges (e.g., not knowing how to talk to professors) that can lead them to feel different from their peers and to question: “Do I have what it takes to succeed in college?” These kinds of questions can lead to disengagement, such as not taking advantage of campus resources. Construal interventions seek to foster the sorts of interpretations that instead shift students toward engagement and persistence–such as “I belong here and have what it takes to succeed” (Stephens, Hamedani & Townsend, 2019; Covarrubias & Laiduc, 2022).

A *social-belonging* approach to intervention addresses students’ challenges by emphasizing that questioning one’s belonging is a common or shared experience, irrespective of students’ particular identities or backgrounds. More specifically, the intervention uses students’ stories to convey that it is normal to feel a lack of belonging, and that belonging will improve with time. This experience of belonging reduces the social class achievement gap by fostering academic engagement (e.g., use of student support services), increasing college persistence, and improving the grades of students from lower-class backgrounds (Murphy et al., 2020; Paunesku et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2016).

*Difference-education* interventions, by contrast, address students’ challenges by explaining the importance of their backgrounds and identities. Specifically, this intervention presents students with stories designed to convey a *contextual theory of social group difference*–an understanding of how people’s different backgrounds and social group memberships shape their experiences and outcomes (Stephens, Hamedani & Townsend, 2019). By understanding the contextual sources of their challenges and strengths in college, students from lower-class backgrounds can gain a sense of empowerment, and, ultimately, improve their academic performance (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014; Ramirez et al., 2020; Stephens, Townsend et al., 2015). By focusing on social group difference and representing it as a potential strength, difference-education improves an additional outcome for students from both lower- and higher-class backgrounds: comfort with social group difference (e.g., having friends from different social class backgrounds; Townsend et al., 2021)

**Interventions Targeting Values.** A second type of intervention connects students’ values or personal lives to their academic pursuits. One such example is *values affirmation* interventions, which ask students to spend a few minutes writing about the values that matter to them. Writing about their values expands students’ view of themselves and the resources available to them, and, in turn, reduces the experience of social identity threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). In doing so, these interventions have been shown to improve course grades, retention in science courses, overall GPA (Harackiewicz et al., 2014), and perceptions of cultural match with a university (Hecht et al., 2020).

Another approach in this area is referred to as a *utility value* intervention. This approach seeks to make course materials (e.g., in STEM fields) more relevant to students’ personal lives. To do so, this intervention asks students to write essays about how what they have learned in a particular course informs their lives (e.g., how a lesson in physiology informs a workout plan; Harackiewicz et al., 2016). By making course material personally relevant, this intervention improves course performance in biology, and is especially beneficial for students who are both from lower-class backgrounds and underrepresented racial minorities (Harackiewicz et al., 2016).

**Interventions Targeting Selves.** A third area of intervention seeks to shore up and build student-focused selves or identities. Building on theories of possible selves and identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2015), this type of intervention recognizes the importance of cultivating student identities that are connected to their academic environment (see Stephens et al., 2011). To illustrate, one intervention highlighted how students' identities depend on education (e.g., “I need to go to college to be an engineer”) and found that education-dependent identities foster engagement in academic pursuits (e.g., completing an extra credit homework assignment; Destin & Oyserman, 2010). Similarly, other research demonstrates that teaching students to connect their academic possible selves to strategies for success can improve the academic initiative, test scores, and grades of students from lower-class backgrounds (Oyserman et al., 2006).

**Summary**. This section reviewed research focused on how different social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the institution level of culture. We described, on the one hand, how educational institutions can disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds, and, on the other hand, how interventions can level the playing field by helping students overcome these obstacles.

## Interactions

As we shift from the institution level to the interaction level of culture, it is important to consider how the idea level informs not only the institution level, but also the interaction level. By *interactions*, we refer not only to specific instances where people actively engage with others (e.g., cross-class interactions), but also to more general experiences or actions that involve more than one person (e.g., a decision to help others). The key idea described above–whether models of self reflect independence–is not only evident in the institutions that people create, but also in their interactions. For example, independent ideas about the value of individual achievement foster individual-focused interactions that are less socially engaging and involve less compassion for others.

The section below focuses on how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the interaction level. We first describe how social class contexts influence how people think about others and their willingness to help others. Second, we examine how social class contexts shape people’s experience of their closest relationships. (e.g., romantic, family, or friends). Finally, we describe research on cross-class interactions and the ability to detect social class during interactions.

***Thinking about Others***

Social class contexts shape people’s cultural models of self (Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014), and these models influence how people think about and respond to other people. Reflecting greater interdependence, people in lower-class contexts pay more attention to other people, are more compassionate and more engaged when they interact with others (Dietze & Knowles, 2016; Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Stellar, et al., 2012). Given their lower position in the social class hierarchy, people in lower-class contexts need to be more vigilant to threat and thus attend more to others (Samson & Zaleskiewicz, 2019). In contrast, reflecting greater independence, people in higher-class contexts tend to be more disengaged in social interactions.

These differences in engagement, in turn, produce social class differences in empathic accuracy–the ability to detect another person’s thoughts and emotions. People in lower-class contexts are more empathically accurate, even when interacting with strangers (Dietze & Knowles, 2021; Kraus et al., 2010). Although this greater accuracy can be adaptive in enabling people in lower-class contexts to be more socially responsive, it can also come with a cost: people in lower-class contexts more accurately track a friend’s hostile emotions and experience more emotional contagion of hostile emotions (Kraus et al., 2011).

This vigilance to threat and greater other orientation in lower-class contexts also produces differences in trust. Overall, people in lower-class contexts have less trust with strangers, but have more trust in relationships, compared to people in higher-class contexts. More specifically, in cross-national surveys, people in lower-class contexts report less trust (e.g., needing to be careful in dealing with people; Kim et al., 2021). However, people in lower-class contexts are more trusting of those they know personally or who are part of their social group (Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018). Thus, although the literature suggests robust links between social class, empathic accuracy, and attention to others, it is relatively more mixed on overall differences in trust.

### Helping Others

Social class contexts also shape *prosocial behavior*–acting in ways that help other people (Keltner et al., 2014). This work has examined how the social class of both the targets and givers impacts prosocial behavior. Research focused on the targets has found that people behave more prosocially toward targets in lower-class contexts than toward targets in higher-class contexts (Van Doesum et al. 2017). Research focused on the social class of the giver has found that people in lower-class contexts are more generous in a Dictator Game (Amir et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2010) and more helpful to an experimenter in distress (Piff et al., 2010).

This original work documenting a main effect of social class on prosocial behavior (Piff et al., 2010) has not always replicated consistently (see Korndörfer et al., 2015; Stamos et al., 2020), suggesting that there may be some critical moderators. In fact, research shows that the effects depend on whether behavior is public or private; whether appeals fit people’s cultural models of self; and whether they are in contexts of uncertainty or inequality (Côté, House, & Willer, 2015; Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Piff, Stancato, Martinez, et al., 2012; Whillans et al., 2017). Specifically, people in lower-class contexts engage in more prosocial behavior (e.g., asking for donations for a good cause) than those in higher-class contexts when their behavior is private, but not public (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016). People in lower-class contexts also donate more often to charitable appeals when they are framed in terms of interdependence (e.g., connections to others), but not independence (e.g., personal control; Whillans et al., 2017). Moreover, the link between social class and prosocial behavior is especially strong in situations of uncertainty or inequality (Piff, Stancato, Martinez, et al., 2012; see also Côté et al., 2015).

### Relationships

Although in social psychology the study of social class and close relationships is relatively new, it has been a focus in sociology for decades. Demographers have shown robust links between social class and rates of marriage, finding that people in lower-class contexts are less likely to marry–and more likely to divorce when they do marry–than those in higher-class contexts (Cherlin, 2010; Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Meanwhile, ethnographic research has highlighted significant barriers to marriage for people in lower-social class contexts (e.g., financial challenges; Edin et al., 2004; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Building on this sociological tradition, research in social psychology has examined how social class contexts shape the psychological experience of people’s relationships, focusing on romantic relationships. This work highlights a paradox: although the material and social conditions of lower-class contexts present more challenges to people’s romantic relationships, relationships are also especially important in these contexts.

On the one hand, people in lower-class contexts face more challenges in their relationships. These challenges are not due to social class differences in valuing romantic relationships (Finkel et al., 2014; Trail & Karney, 2012); They stem from greater financial strain and stress (see Karney, 2021 for a review). Stressful life events are more harmful to relationship satisfaction in lower-class contexts (Maisel & Karney, 2012) and financial strain also undermines relationship well-being (Williamson et al., 2013). For example, people in lower-class contexts have less hope for a financial future with their romantic partner (e.g., being able to buy a house together someday), which in turn links to lower quality in these relationships (Emery & Le, 2014). The greater risks and vulnerability associated with these financial challenges also mean that people in lower-class contexts are more self-protective in their romantic relationships, especially when they feel vulnerable (Emery & Finkel, 2022).

On the other hand, relationships (romantic, as well as family and friends) are also more important in lower-class contexts. People in these contexts spend more time with family and friends (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016), and view relational ties as more binding than do those in higher-class contexts. For example, people in lower-class contexts are less likely to break off relationships with family and friends, consider loyalty more important, and view others as more central to their sense of who they are (Carey & Markus, 2017). Not only do people in these contexts view their own relational ties as more binding but having romantic partners and close friends who are committed to them matters more for their happiness (Tan et al., 2020). Consistent with these differences, people in lower-class contexts who envision supportive relationships as part of a good life have better markers of physical health (Levine et al., 2016).

### Cross-Class Interactions

Just as social class contexts shape people’s closest relationships, they also influence people’s interactions across social group boundaries. Reflecting a general preference for similarity, there is a tendency for people to affiliate more strongly with those from similar social class backgrounds as themselves (Côté et al., 2017). Indeed, even when the opportunity for cross-class interactions arises, these interactions are still quite uncommon (Carey et al., 2022). Nevertheless, when these interactions do occur in university settings, they improve the experience of belonging and academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds (Carey et al., 2022)

### Detecting Social Class

When people interact with people from different social class contexts or backgrounds, they also make snap judgments about the other person’s social class. To study how people make these inferences, researchers often present participants with an image or product of a person (e.g., a speech) and ask them to infer that person’s social class. Even with relatively minimal information—from short videos (Kraus & Keltner, 2009), brief patterns of speech or writing (Kraus et al., 2019), Facebook photos (Becker et al., 2017), and even neutral photographs (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2020)--people can infer social class with some degree of accuracy. These inferences have implications for behavior. For instance, when people perceive job applications as from someone from a higher-class context, they offer a higher starting salary and signing bonus (Kraus et al., 2019; see also Kraus & Mendes, 2014).

What cues lead people to make these judgments about social class? People rely on a variety of cues, some of which lead to accuracy and some of which detract from it. One cue that leads to accuracy is people’s degree of engagement in their interactions with others (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). As discussed previously, reflecting norms of interdependence, people in lower-class contexts tend to be more socially responsive. This tendency is one cue that people use to accurately infer others’ social class. Speech patterns can also cue social class; for example, people infer higher social class based on fewer deviations from what perceivers view as normatively ideal speech patterns (Kraus et al., 2019). Although some cues lead to accuracy, there are also some that lead perceivers astray: people erroneously link happier faces to higher social class (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017) and faces displaying anger, disgust, fear, or sadness with lower social class (Bjornsdottir et al., 2019).

**Summary**. This section reviewed research focused on how different social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the interaction level of culture. We described interactions in the context of general ways of thinking about others, helping others, relationships, cross-class interactions, and detecting social class.

## Individuals

As we shift from the interaction level to the individual level of culture, it is important to consider how the idea level informs not only the institution and interaction levels, but also the individual level. The *individual* level includes thoughts, feelings, and behaviors among individual people (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). For example, independent ideas about the importance of individual achievement can be seen in common evaluative practices in higher education (i.e., evaluating people individually), interactions with peers (e.g., showing less compassion), and in individuals’ patterns of thought, feeling, and action (e.g., dispositional attributions).

The section below focuses on how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the individual level of culture. We first describe how social class contexts influence health and well-being. Second, we examine how social class contexts shape people’s cognition (i.e., attention and attributions, narcissism, and entitlement, thinking and decision-making). Finally, we review research on emotion.

### Health and Well-being

Research suggests that higher-class contexts are associated with a variety of positive outcomes for mental and physical health (e.g., Adler et al., 1994; Diener et al., 2010; Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Hughes et al., 2017; Kivimäki et al., 2020). Below, we first review research on subjective wellbeing, followed by physical health. Subsequently, we discuss potential factors that may moderate or mediate these relationships.

A nuanced relationship exists between social class and individuals’ mental health outcomes, particularly subjective well-being. Subjective well-being consists of two key features: life evaluation (i.e., how one appraises their life when thinking about it) and emotional well-being (i.e., the degree to which the emotions one experiences throughout the day make their life pleasant or unpleasant). Social class is positively associated with both, however, the association with the former is more robust. Specifically, people in higher-class contexts tend to have a more positive life evaluation (Diener et al., 2010; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010) and to view the future as containing fewer negative events (Robb et al., 2009). People in higher-class contexts also report higher emotional well-being as indicated by less sadness (Hudson et al., 2016; Kushley et al., 2015) and somewhat higher happiness (Diener et al., 2010; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Social class is also associated with individuals’ physical health. A robust body of research finds that participating in lower-class contexts is associated with various health outcomes, including premature mortality (e.g., Adler et al., 1994; Harper & Lynch, 2007; Hughes et al., 2017; Kivimäki et al., 2020; Mackenbach et al., 2008). Specifically, there is a monotonic or graded association between social class contexts and indicators of physical health such that each unit of lower education or income is associated with decreases in physical health, and this is true across the social class hierarchy. In other words, not only poverty is associated with worse health outcomes.

**Mediators and Moderators of the Social Class Association with Health.** Social psychological scholars have theoretical and empirical work that reveals there are multiple pathways through which social class contexts impact mental and physical health. This research makes it clear that personal and social resources function as key psychological pathways that can mediate the link between social class contexts and health as well as moderate this link, protecting those in lower-class contexts from poor health outcomes (e.g., the Reserve Capacity Model; Gallo et al., 2005; Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Gallo et al., 2009). Specifically, personal, and social resources—including perceived control, self-esteem, and optimism, as well as social support, social integration, and social capital—help explain the relationship between social class contexts and vulnerability to disease and risk of premature mortality. As mediators, lower perceived personal control (Bailis et al., 2001) and lower perceived status or rank (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; Anderson et al., 2012; Boyce et al., 2010) help explain worse health outcomes among people in lower-class contexts. As moderators, high levels of perceived personal control (Lachman & Weaver, 1998), social support (Hooker et al., 2018), and relationship commitment (Tan et al., 2020) are also associated with a reduction in social class disparities.

The coping strategies that people use can also reduce social class disparities in health. Specifically, strategies that reflect the interdependent behaviors that are afforded in lower-class contexts are associated with better health for those in lower-class, but not higher-class, contexts. Research has examined the use of “shift-and-persist” strategies in which people use reappraisal and emotion regulation to adjust to stressors and endure adversity with a focus on long-term goals (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Chen & Miller, 2012). These coping strategies are consistent with interdependent models of self that emphasize adjusting to the context. Use of shift-and-persist strategies is associated with improved mental and physical health outcomes among those in lower-class contexts (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Chen & Miller, 2012; see also Hittner et al., 2019).

**Cultural Differences in Contributors to Health.** The beliefs and behaviors that contribute to greater health also vary as a function of the models of self that are prevalent in different social class contexts.As noted earlier, cultural models of self indicate the “right” beliefs and behaviors: higher-class contexts more often afford and value independent models of self, whereas lower-class contexts more often afford and value interdependent models of self. When individuals’ beliefs and behaviors match with the class-specific cultural models prevalent in each social class context, people experience better mental and physical health (e.g., Hittner et al., 2019; Levine, 2017; Townsend et al., 2014). Reflecting the value of independence, placing importance on personal resources is associated with better health among individuals in higher-class contexts (Levine et al., 2016). In contrast, reflecting the value of interdependence, recognizing the importance of social resources is associated with better health among individuals in lower-class contexts (Levine et al., 2016).

### Emotion

There is a nuanced relationship between social class and people’s experiences of general (e.g., happiness or sadness) and specific emotions (e.g., anger), as well as how people regulate the emotions they display. As mentioned above, research on emotional well-being has found that, overall, people in higher-class contexts report general emotional experiences of less sadness (Hudson et al., 2016; Kushley et al., 2015) and somewhat greater happiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). However, this relationship is stronger among people who are in the highest and lowest ends of the social class hierarchy (e.g., below average household income; high levels of wealth; Donnelly et al., 2018; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Moreover, there are social class differences in types of experiences that foster happiness (e.g., Lee et al., 2018). For instance, using money to buy experiences, as opposed to material objects, predicts happiness more in higher- than in lower-class contexts.

Research has also examined how social class shapes the frequency with which people experience more specific negative and positive emotions (Hudson et al., 2016). Specifically, among the range of negative emotions, people in higher-class contexts report less daily worry (i.e., “internalizing” emotions) but not less anger or frustration (i.e., “externalizing” negative emotions). Additional work suggests that when people in lower-class contexts feel disadvantaged, they may display more anger and hostility, along with aggressive behavior, than those in higher-class contexts (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016). As for positive emotions, individuals from lower-class contexts more often report experiencing positive emotions that are consistent with interdependent models of self: compassion and love (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018). In contrast, individuals from higher-class contexts were more likely to report positive emotions consistent with independent models of self: contentment and pride (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018).

Just as social class contexts shape the types of emotion people experience, they may also influence individuals’ use of emotion regulation strategies. Initial work suggests that people from higher-class contexts may have greater ability to regulate their emotion compared to those from lower-class contexts (Cote et al., 2010). However, this work only examined the emotion regulation tactic of amplifying emotional reactions, which may be more normative in higher-class contexts that place greater value on individual emotional expression. By contrast, research examining the emotion regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal found no social class differences in ability to use this emotional regulation strategy (Troy et al., 2017; Hittner et al., 2019).

### Cognition

Just as social class shapes emotion, so too does it inform patterns of cognition, including attention and attributions, narcissism and entitlement, and decision-making.

**Attention and Attributions.** Social class context shapes the degree to which individuals attend to focal versus contextual factors and the attributions they are likely to make when explaining behavior—that of others as well as their own (Kraus et al., 2009; Grossmann & Varnum, 2011, Varnum et al., 2012; for an exception see Bowman et al., 2009). This work suggests that individuals in lower-class contexts demonstrate more holistic cognition, attending to the entire context or visual field, compared to those in higher-class contexts (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011). For example, compared to people from higher-class contexts, those from lower-class context were more likely to notice changes in the context or background of an image. In addition, individuals in lower-class contexts are more likely to make dispositional attributions compared to those in higher-class contexts. For example, lower-class contexts are associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing contextual explanations for economic trends, broad social outcomes, and emotion (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). Further, the effect of social class on cognition also extends to individuals’ likelihood to make spontaneous trait inferences as measured by physiological responses in the brain (i.e., the N400, which is a specific event-related potential component; Varnum, Na, Murata, & Kitayama, 2012).

**Narcissism and Entitlement.** Social class contexts also shape individuals’ narcissism and feelings of entitlement. Overall, people in higher-class contexts show greater entitlement, narcissism, overconfidence, and self-esteem (Belmi et al., 2020; Côté, Stellar, Willer, Forbes, Martin, & Bianchi, 2020; Piff, 2014; Von Soest et al., 2018). For example, participation in higher-class contexts is associated with overconfidence in part due to a stronger desire to achieve high social rank (Belmi et al., 2020). However, the general tendency for higher-class contexts to be associated with greater entitlement and narcissism is moderated. Specifically, priming egalitarian values can lead individuals from higher-class contexts to show levels of narcissism that are similar to those of individuals from lower-class contexts (Piff, 2014). In addition, showing high levels of entitlement is most common among those who have consistently participated in higher-class contexts throughout their lives, as opposed to those who have experienced upward or downward mobility (Côté et al., 2021).

**Decision-making.** Higher-class contexts are associated with better decision-making (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Parker & Fischoff, 2005; Shah et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2012). People in higher-class contexts show greater decision-making competence as indexed by performance on a range of tasks, using either an external criterion to indicate accuracy or related judgements to indicate consistency (e.g., Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007). For example, compared to people in lower-class contexts, people in higher-class contexts are less likely to honor sunk costs (Larrick et al., 1993). In addition, Mullainathan, Shah, and colleagues theorize and find that being in very low social class context (i.e., scarcity) is associated with an increased focus on resources, and, ultimately, the economic decision to over-borrow money (e.g., payday loans). These tendencies can be helpful in the short-term by helping people to adapt to their limited financial resources and survive, but in the long run, undermine people’s ability to save for the future and accumulate wealth.

**General Discussion**

Social class divides continue to widen and pose a threat to the health and well-being, civic engagement, and democratic institutions of society. Amidst skyrocketing inequality and plummeting opportunities for social mobility, social class has become a potent and undeniable force in shaping human psychology and behavior. Throughout most of the history of social psychology, social class was studied as an afterthought, or through a relatively narrow, deficit-based lens. However, reflecting the growing significance of the social class divide, social psychologists now recognize that understanding human psychology requires a psychologically informed account of social class. This first-ever chapter on social class in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* is a testament to this profound shift.

The research we reviewed here documents that social class meaningfully patterns a wide range of psychological tendencies–such as the centrality of individual choice or the focus on internal attributes to explain behavior–that were previously considered as a basic component of a universal, human psychology. However, research on social class highlights that these so-called human psychological tendencies are not universal. Instead, they are context-contingent; they are made possible by the conditions of higher-class contexts, which provide abundant financial resources and afford individual freedom, choice, and control.

Building on a core insight of social psychology–that immediate situations drive behavior–our social-class-in-context perspective goes one step further to consider the impact of chronic experiences in social class contexts over time. To fully appreciate how social class matters, it is important to first attend to the material and social conditions of the social class contexts that people participate in (e.g., access to financial resources, how people are socialized in families and schools). As a second step, it is critical to consider how participating in these contexts guides psychological tendencies and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). Indeed, as we have shown in our in-depth review, these social class differences in the *ideas* embedded in cultural models of self guide how people engage with their *institutions*; how they engage in *interactions* with peers, family, and strangers; and, ultimately, how *individuals* think, feel, and act.

## Theoretical Implications

When the authors of this chapter give talks and present at conferences, two of the most commonly asked questions are: “How is social class different from power or status?” and “What is the best way to measure social class?” As we discuss below, the social-class-in-context perspective that we put forth in this article provides specific theoretical insights that help answer both of these questions. First, the social-class-in-context perspective distinguishes social class from related constructs of power and status. Second, the social-class-in-context perspective provides crucial theoretical insights about how to measure social class.

### Social Class Differs from Power and Status

The social-class-in-context perspective suggests that the effects of social class on psychology and behavior are much more than power or status in any immediate situation. Understanding the effects of social class requires considering how chronic experiences in different social class contexts pattern psychology and behavior over time. These chronic experiences yield unique effects that go beyond what theories of power or status would predict on their own. Below, we offer two illustrative examples of the unique effects of social class in the domains of (a) self and identity, and (b) the challenges and strengths that affect people’s behavior across key institutional contexts, such as schools and workplaces.

Social class shapes self and identity in unique ways that theories of power or status would not predict on their own. Although both people with low power and status (across social groups) and people in lower-class contexts display behaviors and psychological tendencies that reflect interdependent ways of being (e.g., Dubois et al., 2015; Rucker & Galinsky, 2016, 2017), people in lower-class contexts are guided by a unique form of interdependence. Specifically, as noted earlier, they develop “hard interdependence” --a way of being a self that is not only about connection and social responsiveness, but also about being tough, strong, and self-protective (Kusserow, 1999; Stephens et al., 2009; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014; Emery & Finkel, 2022). This particular form of hard interdependence helps explain the self-protective tendencies that people in lower-class contexts are more likely to exhibit in the context of romantic relationships (Emery & Finkel, 2022) as well as the tendency to exhibit loyalty and solidarity in the context of social relationships more broadly (Carey & Markus, 2017). These predictions about self-protection and loyalty would not emerge from general theories that link lower power and status to interdependence.

Social class also has unique effects on the challenges and strengths that affect people’s behavior across key institutional contexts, such as schools and workplaces (see Frankenhuis & Nettle, 2020). For example, students from lower-class backgrounds can experience *family achievement guilt*,an aversive feeling of wrongdoing that emerges when students from lower-class contexts leave their families and friends behind to find success in higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). This challenge represents one reason why students from lower-class contexts may underperform in college or drop out without obtaining a degree. Beyond challenges, people from lower-class backgrounds also develop unique strengths, such as the ability to work together well with others (Dittmann, Stephens, & Townsend, 2020). Unlike a single and isolated experience of lower power of status (e.g., one manipulated in the laboratory), it is only the repeated and chronic experience in particular social class contexts that affords these particular challenges *and* strengths. For example, a single instance of lower power or status would be likely to foster greater attention to others (Dietze & Knowles, 2016), but would not provide sufficient experience to actually learn how to synchronize and coordinate well with another person’s thoughts, ideas, and opinions. This type of learning is only possible when people repeatedly find themselves in situations where coordinating, cooperating, and synchronizing one’s behavior with others is necessary and important for survival and success.

In sum, the study of status and power as general phenomena can reveal the general patterns that inform a wide range of social groups’ experiences and outcomes. However, these general studies in isolation do not illuminate the effects of social class in particular and how it shapes people’s distinct selves and identities, as well as the unique challenges and strengths that emerge from lower-class contexts.

### How to Measure Social Class

As noted above, researchers often ask how to operationalize and measure social class. In this section, we seek to provide an answer to this common question. First, we review how social class is typically operationalized and measured, as well as discuss the theoretical roadblocks that can emerge with this approach. Second, we suggest that scholars adopt a theoretically informed approach to measuring social class, one that reflects their particular research question and theorizing about social class. Third, using the social-class-in-context perspective as an example, we leverage this theory to suggest key insights about how to operationalize and measure social class. Specifically, by conceptualizing social class as a social category shaped by experience in social class contexts, this perspective highlights the importance of capturing the material and social conditions that characterize those contexts.

**The Typical Approach**. Researchers tend to measure social class using either objective or subjective measures. The use of a particular measure, however, is rarely justified in relation to the research question or theoretical approach. Commonly used objective measures of social class include education, income, and occupational prestige (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). For subjective measures, the two most commonly used are: the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Adler et al., 2000) and a categorical measure that asks people to report their perception of their own social class group (e.g., working-class, middle-class, upper-class; Bernstein, 1971; Mahalingam, 2003; Dietze & Knowles, 2016; 2021).

Among these many possible measures of social class, scholars tend to either pick one measure (e.g., education) or use a composite measure that comprises multiple measures (e.g., education and income). When researchers use a composite measure, they calculate a number that represents one’s social class by collapsing across multiple indicators of social class (e.g., income, education, and a subjective measure). First, they typically standardize each indicator of social class that comprises the measure. Then, they average these standardized indicators of social class to calculate a single number that represents a relative position across the social class indicators (Browman, Svoboda, & Destin, 2019; Cho et al., 2020; Kraus, Horberg et al., 2011; Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Finally, they compare people at one standard deviation above (higher-class) and one standard deviation below (lower-class) the mean of the sample. Scholars also sometimes rely on a wide range of different measures across studies in a single paper or across papers (e.g., Kraus, Côté & Keltner, 2010; Piff et al., 2010).

**Challenges with the Typical Approach.** Using different measures across studies on the same topic or relying on composite measures are not optimal approaches to measuring social class because they create theoretical challenges (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007). When scholars use different measures within or across papers on the same topic, this can create a roadblock to understanding whether–and to what extent–the effects of social class (e.g., valuing uniqueness) are specific to a given indicator of social class (e.g., education, income, occupation). Consider the following example with studies on prosocial behavior. Using educational attainment as a measure, Study 1 showed that people in lower-class contexts donate more money to a charity. Then, using income as a measure, Study 2 shows that people in lower-class contexts more often help other people in distress. Although these effects converge conceptually, we do not know if income would have predicted donating to charity, or if education would have predicted helping behavior.

Scholars in health psychology agree that another common approach–using composite measures–is not a best practice (Bornstein et al., 2002; Chakraborty, 2002; Duncan & Magnuson, 2002; Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Krieger et al., 1997; Liberatos et al., 1988; Mechanic; 1989). Indeed, a review of the literature on health and psychological well-being concluded that "the consensus seems to be that multiple components should be measured, but that they should be used in analyses separately rather than combined into one scale” (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2002, p. 17). Consistent with this sentiment, the 2007 APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status came to the same conclusion: “one should be careful about creating a composite measure. It is generally more informative to assess the different dimensions of SES and understand how each contributes to an outcome under study rather than merge the measures” (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007; p. 11).

We agree with these recommendations, and we propose that composite measures should be avoided because they undermine theoretical advancement in at least two key ways. First, because composites require researchers to standardize and average their measures, this method assumes that any single unit of any of the measures (e.g., education or income) is equivalent, but the measures do not work that way in practice. For example, going from a high school degree to a four-year degree affords far more power and status than going from a four-year degree to a master’s degree (Schneider & de Alva, 2018). Moreover, by creating a composite measure that comprises multiple measures of social class (e.g., education and income), this approach erroneously assumes that a one unit increase in education is equivalent to a single unit increase in income.

Second, although a composite measure documents the effects of *relatively* higher- or lower-class in a particular sample, it provides little insight about the objective material conditions of social class for that sample (e.g., see Trautmann et al., 2013 for discussion). When considering a group labeled “higher social class,” what level of educational attainment or how much income does that group have on average? The educational attainment or income of participants could, therefore, be very different from one study to the next depending on the social class diversity of the particular sample. For example, in one study, the terms *higher-class* and *lower-class* could refer to people with household incomes of 100k and 50k, respectively. In another study, *higher-class* and *lower-class* could refer to people with 50k and 25k, respectively. Thus, the term *higher-class* in one study could refer to the people who had the exact same objective income as those who were labeled as *lower-class* in the other study.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This disconnect from people’s objective material position in society limits the advancement of theory. Indeed, these measures limit understanding of how the material conditions of social class (e.g., a four-year college degree) shape people’s experiences and outcomes. As Trautmann (2013) and colleagues note, "social class is far from a univariate construct, and dimensions such as wealth, income, education, or occupation can have fundamentally different psychological impacts and behavioral implications” (p. 494). Moreover, this type of composite measure also makes it challenging to compare and generalize results across samples and papers–a step that is also necessary for the advancement of theory.

**Theoretically-informed Guidelines**. To overcome some of these challenges that limit theoretical advances in our understanding of social class, we suggest that researchers allow their research question and theoretical approach guide which social class measures they use in a given project or paper (e.g., see Lareau & Conley, 2008 for a discussion). If scholars are interested in the situational or temporary effects of social class, as opposed to more chronic or cultural effects, then a subjective measure is a good fit. To differentiate among subjective measures–the MacArthur ladder measure and the social class category measure–-researchers should again consider the theory. The ladder measure implies a continuous or linear view of social class and emphasizes the importance of social comparison, whereas the social class category measure implies a discrete social group as well as an identity. For example, when researchers are interested in the impact of individuals’ tendency to endorse an identity as “working-class,” the categorical measure would be well suited to the question.

However, if scholars are guided by a more chronic view of social class, then a measure more connected to the actual material conditions of social class contexts would be a better match. To differentiate among objective measures–education, income, occupation–researchers should again let their research question and theory guide this choice. Educational attainment teaches students dominant cultural capital and socializes them with the cultural norms and models of self that are often expected in higher-class professional contexts (Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012). When cultural differences, self, or identity are the focus of research, educational attainment is an ideal measure to use. Compared to education, income more directly captures the material resources that afford power and control. This measure is most relevant when the research question focuses on the effects of having or lacking material resources. Occupation affords experiences of autonomy, choice, and control (Kohn, 1989; Kohn & Schooler, 1969; 1973; Pearlin & Kohn, 1966). Occupation is therefore an ideal measure to use for specific questions about how conditions of different workplace environments (e.g., autonomy, control, hazards on the job) shape one’s experiences and outcomes.

To further illustrate how one’s particular theory can guide measurement, consider the example of our social-class-in-context perspective and the insights that it offers. This perspective suggests that social class differences in psychology and behavior are rooted in people’s contextual experiences over time. These different social class contexts vary in their material and social conditions (including education, financial resources, and occupation) and psychological affordances (power and status). Conceptualizing social class in this way suggests the importance of identifying a measure or set of measures that will best – or most directly – capture the conditions of people’s social class contexts. In this case, measuring individuals’ education, income, or occupation is a more direct proxy for the conditions of people’s actual social class contexts than subjective measures (e.g., the McArthur ladder). Subjective measures would instead capture the more distal psychological experience of power and status, and they are, therefore, further removed from the conditions of the contexts.

In sum, there are various challenges to measuring the multifaceted construct of social class in a way that helps advance theory. Regardless of the particular measure that researchers use, it is important to consider which measure is most relevant and informative given one’s theory and research question.

## Future Directions

### Toward a Dynamic and Intersectional Conception of Social Class

New research on social class has exploded in the past 20 years. Most of the work during the first four waves has documented myriad ways in which social class matters for psychology and behavior. In this research, social class has been studied in a monolithic way, such that researchers frequently compare a “high” or “higher” social class group to a “low” or “lower” social class group. The next phase of future research should complement these main effect studies and begin to consider more nuanced questions of when social class matters, how it changes over time, and how it intersects with other important social categories such as race or gender.

At this point, there are hundreds of papers documenting main effects of how social class shapes different elements of psychology, but far fewer papers consider the circumstances under which these effects emerge. Research should further explore when and why these well-established effects emerge. For instance, the research on social class and prosocial behavior is one of the few research areas that has documented that the effect is moderated by factors such as the public or private nature of behavior, the experience of uncertainty, and fit with models of self (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Piff, Stancato, Martinez & Kraus, 2012; Whillans et al., 2017). These kinds of studies are important because they illuminate in greater detail the processes or mechanisms through which social class affects psychology and behavior.

Most research on social class has approached it as a largely static, rather than dynamic, phenomenon. Indeed, most studies examine one’s current position in the hierarchy, but do not consider current, past, and future possibilities in conjunction. Some research has begun to explore interesting questions from this more dynamic perspective, for example, by considering momentary shifts in one’s social class identity, as well as the experience of social class transitions (Destin et al., 2017; Phillips, Martin & Belmi, 2020). Research has also begun to consider the role of upward mobility vs. stability in one’s social class context (Martin & Côté, 2019; Martin et al., 2016). For example, one set of studies investigated whether the effects of social class on sense of entitlement vary based on the experience of social class stability compared to upward mobility. This research shows that these transitions matter: people who are both currently in higher-class contexts–and came from higher-class backgrounds–feel more entitled than people currently in higher-class contexts, but who come from lower-class backgrounds (Cote et al., 2021). Moreover, people whose social class was consistently high were more entitled than those who fell down in the hierarchy. Future research should continue to explore the impact of these types of transitions. Research might also consider the impact of the experience of social class stability for multiple generations (e.g., four generations of highly educated, wealthy family members) as opposed to fluctuation from one generation to the next.

Although the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* nearly 31 years ago (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), psychologists have only joined the conversation more recently (see Stewart & McDermott, 2004; Risman, 2004). For example, Cole (2009) argued for the need for an intersectional approach in the study of inequality: "Intersectionality makes plain that gender, race, class, and sexuality simultaneously affect the perceptions, experiences, and opportunities of everyone living in a society stratified along these dimensions. To understand any one of these dimensions, psychologists must address them in combination" (Cole, 2009; p. 179).

Despite these calls for intersectional approaches, research on social class has mostly focused on its effects in isolation, without considering the ways in which social class intersects with other social group memberships and identities, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability status, veteran status, and so on (for exceptions, see Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Harackiewicz et al., 2016). As a starting point, researchers might begin to consider how effects of social class may be amplified, attenuated, or take a different form altogether when social class contexts intersect with the other sociocultural contexts, such as race, gender, or sexuality. For example, if one of the key ways through which lower-class contexts impact psychology and behavior is through interdependent models of self, then how does the intersection of social class with race/ethnicity and gender impact the particular models of self that people are likely to develop? Are women in lower-class contexts, for instance, especially interdependent? And, in turn, how do these particular models of self shape behavior?

### New Topics for The Next Wave of Research on Social Class

Even beyond the need for a more dynamic and intersectional approach, there are important domains of inquiry that have yet to be considered in social psychology. One such key area that is crucial for people’s well-being and life outcomes, but that has not yet been fully considered, is the workplace. In particular, how do employees’ social class backgrounds shape their experiences and outcomes in professional workplaces? Although recent work has begun to consider this question, most of this work has emerged from the field of organizational behavior rather than social psychology (e.g., Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). For example, scholars have developed theoretical frameworks to describe the workplace experiences of *social class transitioners*–those who have moved from one social class context to another (Martin & Côté, 2019; Phillips, Martin, & Belmi, 2020). Other research has considered how social class impacts important work-relevant outcomes, such as the choice about whom to hire, how much salary to pay, whether to seek out power, and which career is a good fit for one’s future goals (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Fang & Tilcsik, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Sharps & Anderson, 2021). In social psychology, recent papers have developed initial theorizing–for example, considering the impact of cultural mismatch in professional workplaces (Stephens, Dittmann, & Townsend, 2017; Townsend & Truong, 2017). Future research should more fully test this theorizing–from both the fields of social psychology and organizational behavior–to better understand how social class matters at work.

Future research should also build on foundational insights about what social class is and how it functions to develop more theoretically informed interventions that go beyond the domain of education. In the institutions section above, we reviewed a wide range of interventions that have successfully reduced social class achievement gaps in educational settings. Although these settings lend themselves nicely to intervention, some of the most pressing societal problems–such as social class disparities in health, civic engagement, and environmentalism–are also ripe for social psychological intervention. Consider the social class divides that threaten civic engagement and democratic norms (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2019; Hartman et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., in press). How might social psychological theories of social class inform interventions designed to increase civic or political engagement? As another example, consider the social class divide in people’s responses to and engagement with efforts to curb climate change (Eom et al., 2018). How might theories of social class inform more effective interventions to reduce energy use?

Beyond expanding to new domains, it is also critical to take new understandings of social class differences – and how they operate in society — and use these theoretical insights to develop more effective interventions. Many existing interventions that target behavior change among people in lower-class contexts, such as those designed to decrease divorce rates, fail (see Karney, 2021; Trail & Karney, 2012). One key reason they fail is because they prioritize the norms and values of people in higher-class contexts, and therefore fail to understand behavior across the social class divide (Stephens et al., 2009). Indeed, most scholars of social psychology disproportionately inhabit social class contexts that consist of people with advanced degrees, professional occupations, and above average incomes. However, in the United States, for example, the vast majority of people have less than a four-year college degree (68%) and inhabit the contexts that we refer to as lower-class (McElrath & Martin, 2021). What this means is that many interventions to change behavior are based on higher-class understandings that do not translate into effective interventions across social class contexts.

# Conclusion

Addressing the most pressing societal problems of the 21st century–including skyrocketing inequality, political polarization, threats to democracy, and climate change–requires an in-depth understanding of human behavior. Significant historical shifts in society’s opportunity structure have laid bare the undeniable and potent role of social class in shaping human behavior. Moreover, as we have shown in this chapter, understanding human behavior–and how to change it with interventions–requires a social psychological account of social class.

Social psychological science has historically prioritized a middle- and upper-class view of what it means to be a human. Yet, the vast majority of people across the globe are not middle- and upper-class, and likewise, do not adhere to these WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) norms put forth by our science. For social psychology to maintain its relevance, it must diversify its focus as an upper-class science to incorporate a much wider range of participants and diversity of human experiences and psychological patterns. Only then will we have a more complete and fuller picture of the psychological science of human behavior.

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1. In lower-class (or higher-class) contexts, people can vary in their level of education, financial resources, and occupations. For example, some people may be high on all three of these factors, while others have a mix of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although power is based on control over relatively objective material resources, we refer to power as a *psychological affordance* because these objective resources also afford the sense of influence or experience of control that is relatively subjective. Thus, power has both objective and subjective elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although race and gender are not typically thought of as “contexts,” cultural psychologists often refer to social categories (such as race and gender) as sociocultural contexts as a shorthand for the experiences common to a given social category. According to Markus and Hamedani (2019): "A 'culture' or 'cultural context' serves as a label for any significant social category associated with shared ideas (e.g., values, beliefs, meanings, assumptions), and practices (e.g., ways of doing, making, and being) that organize people's experience and behavior" (pp. 11-12).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PsycINFO introduced social class as a search term in 1967. We therefore present new social psychological articles on social class starting in 1970 and do so in 5-year increments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although there were a few papers prior to the 1930’s (e.g., Chapin, 1928; Pressey & Ralston, 1919), we locate the start of this first wave of research in 1930 because papers about social class began to be published across multiple consecutive years. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We do not describe theories that explain domain-specific phenomena. For example, we do not include scarcity theory (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013) or shift-and-persist theory (Chen et al., 2012; Chen & Miller, 2012), because they focus on why people engage in counterproductive financial decisions and how children find a path toward health and well-being, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These five moral foundations have taken on other names throughout the years. For instance, Graham et al. (2013) refer to them as Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Participants' own social class did not impact these perceptions of pain (Summers et al., 2021; 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Much less research has examined how workplaces or neighborhoods disadvantage individuals from lower-class backgrounds (for exceptions, see Yantis & Bonam, 2021; DeOrtentiis et al., 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. More recent research has begun to theorize about the implications of this mismatch in workplace settings for employees from lower-class backgrounds (e.g., see Townsend & Truong, 2017; see also DeOrtentiis et al., 2022). One of the only research examples of cultural mismatch in the workplace shows that people from lower-class contexts are less likely than those from higher-class contexts to seek power when it is represented as self-interested but just as likely to seek power when power is framed in terms of prosocial goals (e.g., helping others; Belmi & Laurin, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. When scholars use composite measures, at a minimum, they should seek to overcome this challenge by describing in greater detail who is being labeled as “higher-” or “lower-class” in a given sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)