

Moving Toward a Social-Class-in-Context Perspective

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I. Introduction

Social class is a relatively new topic in the lifespan of social psychology, especially compared to other fields such as sociology. Social psychological research on this topic exploded during the 2000's and has continued to be a major research topic since then. During this first phase, researchers have focused on identifying the different psychological tendencies that emerge for individuals in different social class contexts. Despite the best of intentions, this emphasis on individuals' psychological tendencies individualizes social class, which risks conveying the idea that social class differences in psychology are a product of individuals. Likewise, describing participants as "working-class people" or "middle-class people" reflects this focus on individuals. Although most contemporary scholars theorize that social class differences in psychology are a product of the contextual experiences (e.g., access to available resources) that produce them, the focus on individual differences – coupled with the language typically used to describe those differences – means that scholars often lose sight of the critical role of contexts in creating social class.

Moving beyond this individual focus, **in the next phase of research on social class, we suggest that researchers should adopt a *social-class-in-context perspective*—a much closer attention to and focus on the social class contexts that create social class differences in psychology and behavior.** To lay out our argument underlying this proposed shift in focus, we first define social class in a way that clearly links it to the contexts that produce it. Building on this definition of social class, we then describe what it means to move toward the *social-class-in-context perspective*. Third, we articulate the important implications that emerge from adopting this perspective. Finally, we suggest some possibilities for future directions that take the role of contexts more seriously.

II. What is social class?

Although social psychology scholars have been studying social class as a core topic since the early 2000's, it is notable that the field has not adopted a clear, precise definition. Prior papers have typically defined social class in the following way: by stating that social class is *based on* a constellation of factors, usually including educational attainment, occupational status, and/or income or financial resources. What is perhaps most striking about this approach to the definition, however, is that it does not say what social class *is* or how it relates to similar constructs such as power or status. For example, typical definitions do not state whether social class is a social category, identity, or a position in the hierarchy.

For the field to be in a position to more closely attend to the contexts that create social class, we first need a more precise definition of social class that explains its relationship to contexts. Thus, we propose the following definition: "a positioning in a social hierarchy that is based on having access to the material and social resources that afford power and status in a given environment" (Stephens, Emery, & Townsend, in press, p. 5). In most countries across the globe, the material and social resources that contribute most to one's power and status are educational attainment, financial assets, and occupational prestige. However, these material and social resources can also include broad features of the environment such as the safety of one's

neighborhood, access to education, the quality of schools available, the type of socialization that families provide, and opportunities for choice, influence, and control. We use the term *social class contexts* to refer to these environments that differ in their available material and social resources.

In a given context, when people gain access to the material and social resources valued in that environment, they will then be in a position to claim higher levels of power and status. At the same time, other people will also be more likely to afford them the power and status that they have claimed. The amount of power and status that people gain will, in turn, position them in the social class hierarchy. Specifically, higher levels of power and status will position people higher in the hierarchy, whereas lower levels of power and status will position them lower in the hierarchy. We use the term *power* to refer to the ability to influence others by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments (Anderson et al., 2012). Compared to power, *status* is relatively more subjective and this term refers to the esteem or respect that an individual enjoys in the eyes of others (Fast et al., 2012; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022).

There are at least two important features of this definition of social class that explicate its relationship to social class contexts. First, this definition emphasizes that the social class assigned to an individual derives from the resources this person has access to in their social class contexts. This feature of the definition highlights that one's position in the social class hierarchy is always contingent on social class contexts. Second, by focusing on the fact that the resources valued in a particular context afford power and status, this definition of social class emphasizes the context-contingent nature of this process. For example, in some national contexts, the occupation of a teacher affords much more power and status—and thus a higher social class—than in other contexts (Cohen et al., 2017). Indeed, at its peak, a high school teacher's yearly salary in the Czech Republic (25k USD) and Hungary (30k USD) is less than one third of a high school teacher's salary in Switzerland (109k USD; Gal et al., 2019). Since income affords power and also signals the status accorded to an occupation, this variation in income illustrates how the larger national context shapes the level of power and status afforded to a given resource—in this case, one's occupation.

A. Intersectionality

Just as one's position in the social class hierarchy is shaped by contexts, so too is it informed by intersections with other social contexts.¹ Although researchers often discuss social class in isolation from other social contexts, social class necessarily intersects with other meaningful social contexts, such as gender, race or ethnicity, age, nation of origin, sexual orientation, and religion. Higher- versus lower-social class contexts intersect with some contexts far more often than others given the highly unequal distribution of resources across social

¹ Cultural psychologists often refer to a wide range of social categories or identities (e.g., gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation) as sociocultural contexts. This term is meant to serve as a shorthand for the experiences in a given context that are common to a given social category or identity. As Hamedani and Markus (2019) explain, “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, being) that organize people's experience and behavior.” (pp. 11-12).

groups. Indeed, in the United States, Black, Latinx, and Native American people are far more likely to live in lower-class contexts than White people (Reeves et al., 2016; Thomas & Moye, 2015). Illustrating this strong link or association between race and social class, research clearly shows that people racially stereotype individuals in lower-class contexts as Black (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017, 2019). Likewise, following a similar pattern, women are more likely to live in lower-class contexts than men (Atkinson et al., 2018; Blau & Kahn, 2017; Bleiweis et al., 2020). The reason for this uneven distribution of social class across race and gender is that these racially minoritized people and women have less access to the material and social resources that afford power and status—and ultimate higher social class positioning—in the United States compared to White people and men, respectively.

These intersections with other social contexts also inform the particular ways in which a person’s social class will affect their psychology and behavior (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). For example, a person in a lower-class Black context will be much more likely to live in a neighborhood with concentrated poverty than someone in a lower-class White context (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Reardon et al., 2015). Exposure to concentrated poverty translates into less access to valuable resources, such as access to influential social networks, healthy food, and green space or parks (Firebaugh & Acciai, 2016; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). These lower-class Black contexts also present people with the additional stress and uncertainty that come from the risk of exposure to adversity, such as pollution, violence, crime, and unemployment (Bailey et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016). Fewer valuable resources—coupled with greater stress—means that people in lower-class Black contexts may need to rely on others even more than people in lower-class White contexts. This stronger need to rely on others should then translate into more interdependent psychological tendencies and behaviors than in lower-class White contexts.

III. What does it mean to take a social-class-in-context perspective?

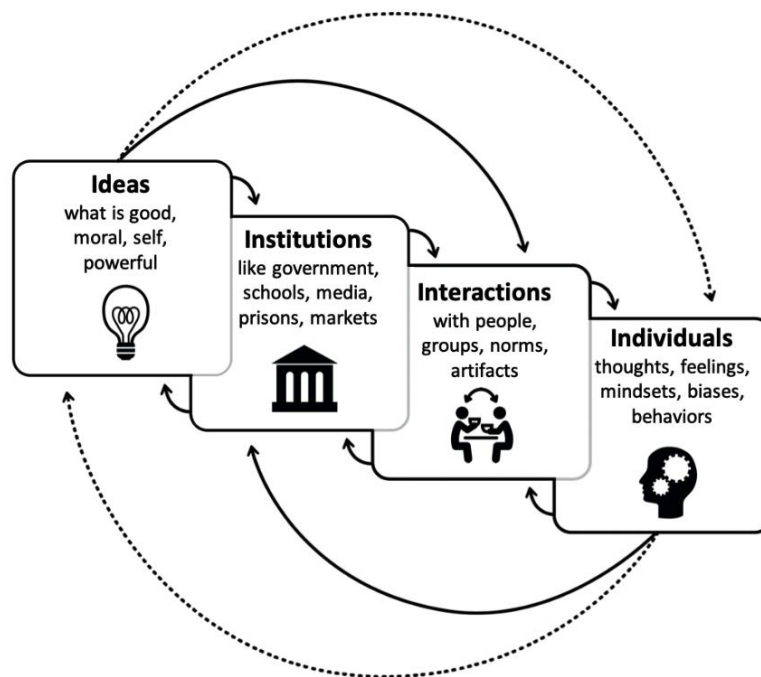
Building on this definition of social class that foregrounds the social class contexts that create social class, we next describe what it means to move toward a *social-class-in-context perspective*. A social-class-in-context perspective requires recognizing how people’s social class contexts afford differences in psychology and behavior. More specifically, it means attending to the ways in which the resources available in these contexts impact psychology and behavior across interacting levels of culture. Cultural psychologists break down culture into the following four components to analyze its effects: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

Attending to resources requires first identifying the amount and type of resources available to people in a given context (e.g., amount of financial assets or family wealth, opportunities for choice and control). Second, it is important to examine how access to those particular resources both constrains and affords particular psychological tendencies and behavior. For instance, if a person has access to a great deal of choice and control in their everyday life, this will allow that person to behave in ways that are relatively unconstrained. When people can act as they please with few constraints, this, in turn, encourages self-reflection (e.g., asking “Who am I and who do I want to be?”) and the development of personal preferences, ideas, and opinions that help people to answer these questions.

By acknowledging the specific ways in which resources create social class differences in psychology and behavior, a social-class-in-context perspective also highlights why social class is not and should not be treated like an individual attribute or characteristic. Although psychologists often talk about people as *being* a social class (e.g., “people who are lower-class” or “lower-class people”), one’s social class and its psychological and behavioral effects are necessarily contingent on the resources that one can access in a particular context. For example, when 9,000 banks failed during the Great Depression, the life savings of millions of Americans were erased instantaneously (Pierce, 2021, p. 33). As a result, people who were quite wealthy during that time period were likely no longer considered higher-class after the loss of these material resources. Alternatively, if someone considered lower-class were to win millions of dollars in the lottery, these financial resources may lead others and society to consider this person as higher-class than they were before. In other words, people can only attain a higher-class in society to the extent that the necessary resources are available to them.

Figure 1.

The Four Interacting Levels of Culture



Note. From “Understanding culture clashes and catalyzing change: A culture cycle approach”

by M. 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.

A. The need to consider four interacting levels of culture

Why is it critical to analyze social class differences across all four levels of culture? To answer this question, it is fruitful to consider the insights we would miss if we were to examine only one level of culture in isolation—for example, the individual level. One common question that people ask about social class is the following: why are people in lower-class contexts more humble and less assertive than people in higher-class contexts? Focusing only on the individual level would likely lead to an erroneous, short-sighted conclusion: that people in lower-class contexts are essentially different from and naturally less confident than their higher-class counterparts. This narrow focus on the individual level would also hinder understanding of the ways in which social class contexts create and maintain social class differences. That is, we would not be able to fully appreciate how ideas, interactions, institutions interact with the individual level to create these social class differences.

If we instead adopt a social-class-in-context perspective, this would mean going beyond the single-level focus on individuals by relying on a much broader lens to answer this question. We would need to consider how each of the four levels of culture interact with each other to contribute to this social class difference. After recognizing the individual difference in people's behavior, a social-class-in-context perspective would point to the ways in which the other three levels also support and maintain this difference. Attending to the institution level would lead us to consider how *institutions*—or social structures that provide and legitimize a set of rules—such as schools in lower-class contexts can foster the tendency toward humility and an emphasis on being as good as, but not better than, others. Since schools in these contexts seek to prepare children for their likely futures in blue-collar jobs (e.g., working in a factory), they often create curricular and pedagogical practices that encourage children to learn to adapt to and defer to others (Anyon, 1980; Kohn & Schooler, 1969, 1973).

Next, considering the interaction level, we would recognize how *interactions*—or engaging with others—within schools and within one's family could further foster this tendency toward humility. For example, socialization practices within lower-class families often instill humility by setting clear boundaries and by indicating to children when their claims or assertions are factually incorrect (Miller et al., 2005; Miller & Sperry, 2012, 1987). In doing so, teachers and parents seek to prepare their children for a harsh and unforgiving world—one without an economic safety net—that may not tolerate their mistakes. Finally, at the idea level, we would consider how *ideas*—broad assumptions about what is good, true, or moral—would foster humility and deference. Indeed, ideas in lower-class contexts often assert that being a good person means following the rules, adapting and adjusting to the needs of others, and being part of the group (e.g., Stephens et al., 2007). These social class differences at all four levels continue to afford and maintain humility at each of the other interacting levels.

Analyzing social class differences by considering all four levels of culture (as opposed to a single level) provides important insights. Considering all four levels offers a much more complete and nuanced understanding of the nature of the social class differences and why they can be so resistant to change. Indeed, social class differences are not just created at the individual level by people who freely choose to engage in a given behavior (e.g., to eat unhealthy food).

Instead, the tendency for people in lower-class contexts to eat unhealthy food is likely reinforced and maintained across levels of the culture cycle (e.g., by institutional policy choices that create food deserts in lower-class contexts). In other words, individual behavior is sustained by multiple elements of culture interacting in a system that leans toward reproducing itself.

With a greater awareness of the multiple, intersecting factors that create and sustain these differences, we are better positioned to understand why interventions designed to change behavior (e.g., to increase consumption of healthy food) so often fail. To the extent that interventions only address one level of culture (e.g., at the individual level: creating a mindset that appreciates the benefits of healthy food), they are likely to be unsuccessful in the long run. This is because the other three levels of culture do not support—and instead, actively interfere with—this behavior change (e.g., Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Stephens et al., 2012, 2021). For example, equipped with a new mindset that appreciates the benefits of healthy food, people would also need support at an institution level—access to affordable healthy food in their local grocery stores. Access to healthy food would, further, need to be reinforced by interactions with family and friends who also value and create opportunities to eat healthy food. These interactions, in turn, would need to be supported by ideas in the local social class context that suggest that healthy food is for “people like me” (Oyserman et al., 2007).

B. The need to describe social class using language that foregrounds contexts

As noted earlier, although researchers theorize that social class differences are the product of differential access to resources across social class contexts, a common practice is to describe participants as *being* a particular social class. Language describing participants often includes descriptions of them as “lower-class people” or “higher-class people.” Other examples include stating that “people *are* higher social class” or “people who *have* a lower social class.” These types of descriptions imply that one’s social class is attached to and a property of people. For example, if someone *is* a particular social class, this essentializes and individualizes their social class positioning, and perhaps implies that they will carry that social class with them across contexts. This suggestion can lead to a strong attention to individuals that can foster victim-blaming and also obscure the reality of how social class is produced.

Given that social class is produced through experiences in contexts with unequal resources, we suggest using alternative language that more closely reflects this reality. Instead of labeling individuals as “lower-class people,” a social-class-in-context perspective suggests the importance of describing them as “people in lower-class contexts” or “people from lower-class contexts.” Although these statements are less concise, they provide a more accurate portrayal of how social class is produced and maintained. In turn, they should reorient researchers and practitioners away from victim-blaming and toward a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple, intersecting contextual factors that shape what it means to be positioned in a particular location in the social class hierarchy.

IV. Implications of a social-class-in-context perspective

A. Challenges with the current approach to measuring social class

Social psychologists have measured social class in many different ways, and there are very few commonly accepted standards for how to do so. Most psychologists either use a “composite” or “single indicator” approach. A composite approach involves measuring multiple indicators of social class (e.g., educational attainment and income), standardizing each measure, and then combining and averaging those measures to calculate a single number that is meant to represent one’s relative position in the social class hierarchy across the indicators (e.g., Browman et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2011; Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Researchers then compare people at one standard deviation above the mean of the sample (i.e., referring to them as higher-class) and one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., referring to them as lower-class). The single indicator approach relies on only one indicator (e.g., income, perceived social class status), which is meant to serve as a proxy for one’s position in the social class hierarchy. When researchers choose a single indicator, they sometimes rely on different measures across studies or papers on a given topic (e.g., Kraus et al., 2010; Piff et al., 2010).

The composite approach and the use of different measures across studies, which is common with the single indicator approach, both create theoretical challenges that distance the study of social class from the contexts that create it (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007). For example, composite measures can hinder our understanding of the psychological effects of the particular material and social resources available in people’s social class contexts. This is a significant problem for researchers who seek to take a social-class-in-context perspective. Although a composite approach documents the effects of having *relatively* higher- or lower-class in a particular sample, it does not indicate the amount or type of material and social resources available in that sample’s social class contexts (e.g., see Trautmann et al., 2013, for discussion). For instance, when considering a group labeled “higher social class,” how much income does that group have and how does the amount of income impact people’s psychological tendencies and behavior? Moreover, the income of participants labeled “higher social class” could be very different from one study to the next depending on the social class diversity of a sample. Again, this disconnect between the labels used and actual resources available in the context creates challenges to understanding the impact of those resources.

Alternatively, when researchers use different measures across studies in a single paper or across papers on the same topic, this can hinder our understanding of how the particular resources available in social class contexts shape psychology and behavior. For example, in the domain of studies on ethical behavior, consider the impact of using different resources to measure social class. Using educational attainment as a measure, a first study could show that people in lower-class contexts (measured as having a high school level degree) are more ethical in their financial decision-making. Then, using income as a measure, a second study could show that people in lower-class contexts (measured as having a household income of less than \$50,000 a year) more often make ethical decisions in the context of relationships. Although these effects converge conceptually, we do not know if income would have predicted ethical financial decisions, or if education would have predicted ethical decisions in relationships. Reporting only income or education in a given study can therefore hinder our understanding of whether the effects of social class are specific to a given resource or indicator of social class. Highlighting the extent of this challenge, at this point in the development of social class research, we have very little understanding of which social class effects are specific to a single social class indicator or which are consistent across indicators.

B. Implications of a social-class-in-context perspective for measuring social class

To overcome the disconnect created by these typical approaches and connect social class more closely to the contexts that create it, we recommend measuring social class in a way that reflects the social-class-in-context perspective, as well as the particular research question of interest. The social-class-in-context perspective suggests that social class differences in psychology and behavior are a product of contextual experiences over time. These different social class contexts vary in their material and social resources (including education, financial resources, and occupation) and psychological affordances (power and status). Conceptualizing social class in this way suggests the importance of measuring social class in a way that most closely captures the resources of people's social class contexts.

Measures of social class vary in the degree to which they capture actual or objective material and social resources of a given context. Objective measures of income, education, or occupation capture material and social resources relatively directly. For example, having a \$50,000 yearly household income in the United States tells us something very detailed and specific about the material resources available in a person's social class context. A \$50,000 income means that a person has a specific amount of money to spend on a yearly basis. Moreover, we also learn what this income can buy someone relative to the cost of various basic expenses (i.e., rent, food, etc.). In contrast, a measure of perceived or subjective social class status (i.e., ranking oneself on the MacArthur ladder relative to others; Adler et al., 2000) is one step removed from the contexts people inhabit. A subjective measure is based more on the individual experience or sense of power and status that people gain based on their access to and use of particular resources. Therefore, measuring individuals' education, income, or occupation is a more direct proxy for the resources of people's actual social class contexts than subjective measures. To the extent that researchers are guided by a social-class-in-context perspective, they should prioritize the use of objective over subjective measures.

Among the possible objective indicators that focus on the context, one should also consider which particular measure is most relevant to one's research question. Educational attainment teaches students the cultural capital, cultural norms, and models of self that are valued in higher-class contexts (Stephens et al., 2012). In higher education, students have many experiences inside and outside of the classroom designed to elaborate their independent selves. For instance, they learn to express their personal ideas and opinions and their abilities are typically evaluated while they are working individually (Dittmann et al., 2020). Therefore, when cultural differences, self, or identity are the focus of research, educational attainment is an ideal measure to use. Compared to education and occupation, income more directly captures the material resources available in the context that afford power and control. This measure is therefore most relevant when the research question examines the impact of material resources on psychology or behavior. Occupation affords differing opportunities for choice, control, and autonomy (Kohn, 1989; Kohn & Schooler, 1969, 1973; Pearlin & Kohn, 1966). Occupation is therefore an ideal measure to use for specific questions about how these experiences (e.g., of control) in different workplace environments shape people's experiences and outcomes.

C. Future directions for research adopting a social-class-in-context perspective

Building on the insights that arise from a social-class-in-context perspective, future research should consider how to more directly capture the features of the contexts that shape social class. For example, social psychologists typically measure social class at an individual level by capturing the resources to which an individual has access (e.g., an individual's income). Alternatively, to fully consider the role of social class contexts, one could also capture features of these contexts at a more structural or community level. For example, researchers could measure neighborhood wealth or school funding within a given community. In addition to individual-level resources, these community-level resources could help us to more fully capture the range of resources available in a given environment. This, in turn, could enable us to better understand the psychological or behavioral effects of social class.

A social-class-in-context perspective also suggests the importance of considering the four interacting levels of culture to understand how social class shapes psychology and behavior. However, most social psychological research has focused on either the individual or idea level. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior, future research should do more to consider the interaction and institutional level of culture. For example, how do experiences with institutions of education afford social class differences in culture-specific norms? And, how do interactions with teachers and peers in the classroom shape social class differences in how students understand themselves?

As noted earlier, a key part of taking the context seriously means recognizing that the effects of social class contexts are shaped by their intersection with other meaningful social contexts, such as those demarcated by race or ethnicity and gender. Much of the existing research on social class has treated social class as though it is fully separate from these other social categories or identities. Moving forward, future research should consider how the effects of social class may be shaped by these intersections. For example, how does the intersection of social class with race and gender impact the models of self that guide people's psychology and behavior?

V. Conclusion

Social psychologists recognize the critical role of the immediate situation or environment on psychological functioning and behavior. At a theoretical level, they also tend to recognize the important role of people's larger social class contexts. However, in practice, the ways in which social class has been defined, measured, and described often lead to an over-individualizing of social class, such that it is treated as an individual attribute or property of the person. Such an approach risks essentializing social class. Moving forward, researchers should adopt a social-class-in-context perspective to more fully acknowledge the reality of social class as a product of social class contexts. Doing so will enrich and develop our theorizing so that we gain a better understanding of the particular material and social resources of contexts that foster particular psychological tendencies and behavior.

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