

# Taking a social-class-in-context perspective on the psychology of social class

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## Abstract

Social class researchers in social psychology have pushed the field to become more focused on and attentive to the critical role of sociocultural contexts. In this article, we label and articulate the key ingredients of the approach that many social psychological researchers have come to use: what we refer to as a *social-class-in-context perspective*. This perspective means attending to the contextual differences in resources that create social class differences in psychology and behavior. We also suggest some additional steps that researchers can take to become even more attentive to and responsive to the important role of contexts in creating social class. As a first step, we suggest the importance of adopting a definition of social class that directly explicates its relationship to similar constructs, such as power and status, and also links it to the contexts that produce it. Second, building on this definition of social class, we then describe the importance of taking a multi-level approach to understanding how different social class contexts shape psychology and behavior. Finally, we articulate the important implications and future directions that emerge from intentionally adopting this perspective.

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## 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 – conducted mostly in the United States and Western Europe – exploded during the 2000's and has continued to be a major research topic since then. This newfound interest in social class has pushed the field of social psychology to take a wide-angle lens to look beyond immediate situations and to become even more focused on and attentive to contexts. This shift has illuminated how understanding psychology and behavior is only possible with a recognition of the critical role of a person's positioning within the social class hierarchy (e.g., Covarrubias et al., 2019; Croizet & Claire, 1998; Doyle & Easterbrook, 2024; Goudeau et al., 2024; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Kraus et al., 2012; Millet & Croizet, 2024; Mzidabi et al., 2024; Stephens et al., [in, press](#); Yilmaz et al., 2024).

In a recent chapter in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Stephens et al., [in, press](#)), we reviewed the last 20 years of social psychological research on social class, and also suggested the importance of taking what we referred to as a *social-class-in-context perspective*. Extending this work, the current article focuses on articulating the key elements of this context-focused approach, applying it in particular to the context of education. A social-class-in-context perspective means paying close attention to the contextual differences in resources that create social class differences in psychology and behavior. We also suggest some additional steps that researchers can take to become even more attentive to and responsive to the important role of contexts in creating social class. First, we suggest the importance of adopting a definition of social class that explicates its relationship to similar constructs, such as power and status, and that clearly links it to the contexts that produce it. Second, building on this definition of social class, we then describe the importance of taking a multi-level approach to understanding how resources impact psychology and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Hamedani et al., 2024; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Finally, we articulate some implications and future directions that emerge from intentionally adopting this perspective.<sup>1</sup>

### What is Social Class?

Although scholars in social psychology have been studying social class as a core topic since the early 2000's, it is notable that many scholars have not adopted a clear, precise, and consistent definition of this important construct. Indeed, in an overarching theoretical paper, Antonoplis (2023) reported that scholars rarely define social class theoretically. In fact, based on their careful coding of the literature focused on effects of social class, they found that 79% of social psychological articles did not include a definition of social class at all.

Among the papers in social psychology that provide a definition of social class, a common practice is to define social class in the following way: by stating that social class is based on a

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<sup>1</sup> Although the vast majority of social psychological research on social class has been conducted in the United States and Western Europe, the suggestions that we make in terms of taking the context seriously are relevant to social class research regardless of the location of the research. For example, the suggestion about taking a multilevel approach to studying social class is a strategy that is helpful irrespective of the specific cultural context in which research is being conducted. The particular conclusions that researchers draw from a given study, however, is of course context- and culture-specific (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Stephens et al., [in, press](#)).

constellation of factors, usually including educational attainment, occupational status, and/or income or financial resources. Likewise, many papers define social class in terms of how the paper intends to measure it (e.g., via educational attainment; Antonoplis, 2023). 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). Similarly, Varnum and colleagues (2012, as cited in Antonoplis, 2023) state that “class is usually defined by parental educational attainment [...] or one’s own educational attainment when non-student samples are used” (p. 518). What is perhaps most striking about these definitions, however, is that they do not say what social class *is* – for example, is it a social category, identity, context, or position in the hierarchy? Other definitions do state what social class is (e.g., a position or standing in the hierarchy), but do not say how it relates to other similar constructs such as power and status. For example, Dubois and colleagues (2015, as cited in Antonoplis, 2023) state that social class is “people’s relative standing in society based on wealth and/or education”.

For the field to be better equipped to more closely attend to the contexts that create social class, we suggest that it would be helpful to adopt a more precise and theoretically-driven definition of social class that explains both what social class is and its relationship to other important constructs. Thus, drawing from our chapter in *The Handbook in Social Psychology* (Stephens et al., [in press](#)), we define social class as: “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 et al., [in press](#), *What Is Social Class?* section).

This definition incorporates both relatively objective elements of social class (access to material and social resources) and relatively subjective elements (power and status). In the United States and Western Europe, as well as most other national cultural contexts, the relatively objective material and social resources that contribute most to a person’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 that differ markedly based on both the local and national cultural context one inhabits (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Conner, 2014; Yosso, 2005). For example, these resources could include access to affordable housing, stable employment, and grocery stores; the ways that families and schools socialize children about norms and values; access to influential social networks; 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. For example, when people obtain higher levels of education, attain managerial roles in their occupations, or access higher incomes, they will have more power to influence others in ways that are consistent with their preferences or desires. Given these higher levels of resources, other people will also be more likely to respond positively and defer to them.

The psychological affordances of power and status that people gain will, in turn, position them in the social class hierarchy. 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. In other words, the amount of power and status people have acquired through their access to material and social resources will position them in the hierarchy. The term *power* refers to the ability to influence others by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments

(Anderson et al., 2012), whereas the term *status* 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 the proposed definition of social class that explicate its relationship to social class contexts. First, this definition emphasizes the critical role of the relatively objective resources that create social class: that is, a person's social class derives from the resources available in their social class contexts. This focus on available resources highlights that a person'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 discussion, see Cohen et al., 2017; see also Antonoplis, 2023). 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. Indeed, even at their respective highest salary levels, 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 afforded to an occupation, this variation in income illustrates how the larger national cultural context can shape the level of power and status that become attached to a given resource – in this case, one's occupation (e.g., Kopelman, 2009; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010; Torelli et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2006).

## Intersectionality

Just as one's position in the social class hierarchy is shaped by contexts, it is also informed by intersections with other social contexts.<sup>2</sup> Researchers often discuss social class in isolation from other contexts. However, recently, scholars have highlighted the importance of taking an intersectional lens to study social class disparities (e.g., in higher education; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Valle & Covarrubias, 2024). This is because social class necessarily intersects with other meaningful social contexts, such as gender, race or ethnicity, age, nation of origin, sexual orientation, and religion.<sup>3</sup> Higher- versus lower-social class contexts intersect with some contexts far more often than others, influenced by systemic inequalities and policies that contribute to the highly unequal distribution of resources across social groups. Indeed, women are more likely to live in lower-class contexts than men (Atkinson et al., 2018; Blau & Kahn, 2017; Bleiweis et al., 2020). Similarly, 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 in the United States (a context in which race is an especially important cultural context) clearly shows that people tend to racially stereotype individuals in lower-class contexts as Black (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017, 2019). The reason for this uneven distribution of social class across race and gender is that racially minoritized people and

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the particular contexts that are meaningful will depend on the larger national cultural context that a person resides in. For instance, race is particularly meaningful context in the United States, but may be less important in national cultural contexts that are more homogenous in terms of race.

women tend to have less access to the material and social resources that afford power and status – and, in turn, higher social class positioning – in the United States compared to White people and men, respectively. For example, McDonald and Day (2010) found that racially minoritized people and women have less access to social resources<sup>4</sup> – such as information and social networks – compared to White men. Moreover, in the educational context, racially minoritized students are more likely to attend segregated schools in high-poverty neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2015). These schools tend to have fewer resources (e.g., lower-quality books, less qualified teachers, larger class sizes, and less access to high-quality curricula) compared to schools serving predominantly White students (Boyd et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

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 neighborhood in the United States will be much more likely to be exposed to concentrated poverty than someone in a lower-class White neighborhood (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Reardon et al., 2015). Exposure to concentrated poverty in the United States translates into less access to valuable resources, such as influential social networks, healthy food, and green spaces or parks (Firebaugh & Acciai, 2016; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). These contexts also present people with the additional stress and uncertainty that come from the risk of exposure to adversity, such as pollution, schools with inadequate resources and funding, police violence, crime, and unemployment (Bailey et al., 2021; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Williams et al., 2016). This systematic disadvantaging of lower-class Black neighborhoods originates from both historic and ongoing racially discriminatory policies and practices (e.g., lending practices that prevented Black people from obtaining loans in the United States; Lane et al., 2022). Fewer resources – coupled with greater stress – means that people in lower-class Black contexts in the United States may need to turn to others for support even more than people in lower-class White contexts. Consistent with prior research that links lower social class contexts to interdependence, more recent research suggests that this stronger need to rely on others in lower-class Black contexts may translate into even more interdependent psychological tendencies and behaviors than in lower-class White contexts (see Brannon et al., 2015; Harackiewicz et al., 2016).

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE A SOCIAL-CLASS-IN-CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE?

Building on this understanding of social class that emphasizes the important role of contexts, we next label and articulate the key ingredients of the approach that most social class researchers have come to adopt: what we refer to as a social-class-in-context perspective. First, a social-class-in-context perspective requires recognizing how the resources available in people's social class contexts afford differences in psychology and behavior. Attending to resources means 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, access to influential social networks). Second, it means theorizing about and examining how access to those particular resources can both afford and constrain particular psychological tendencies and behavior. For instance, if a per-

<sup>4</sup> As Yosso (2005) discusses in their community cultural wealth model, communities of color also possess various forms of social and cultural capital. However, these are often overlooked and unrecognized in contexts (e.g., education) that favor resources valued by the dominant groups in society.

son has access to a great deal of choice and control in their everyday life (as is often the case with higher social class in the United States), this will allow that individual to behave in ways that are relatively unconstrained (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). When people can act as they please with few constraints, this encourages self-reflection (e.g., asking “Who am I and what kind of person do I want to be?”) and the development of personal preferences, ideas, and opinions (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2007). In contrast, those who lack access to these resources encounter constraints that limit their choices; For example, students facing high levels of financial pressure often find their job options restricted, prioritizing immediate income over long-term career prospects (Buzan & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2024).

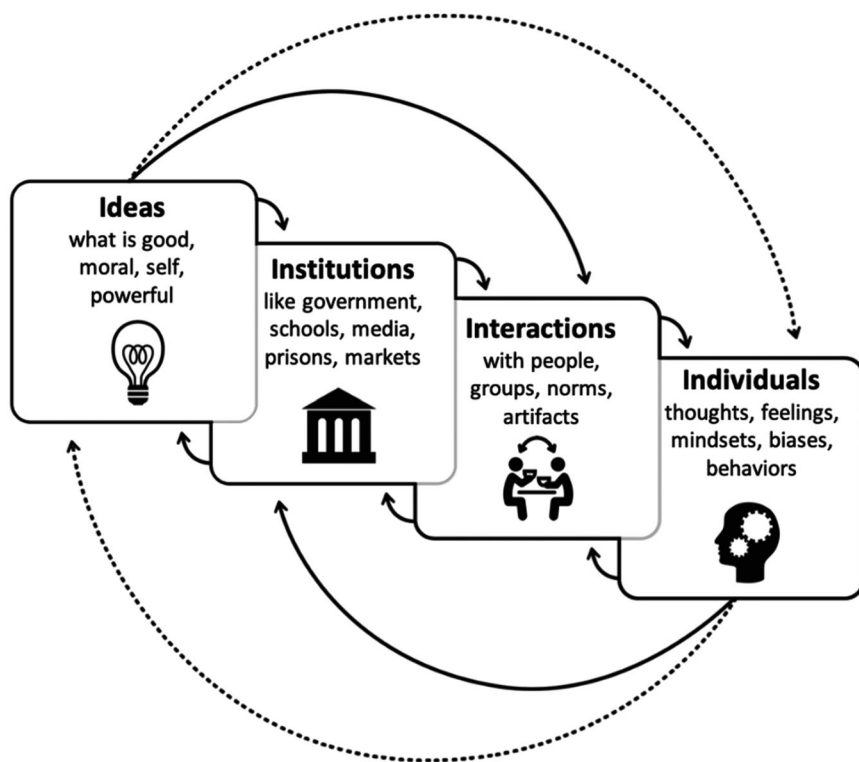
A social-class-in-context perspective also powerfully illuminates why social class is not and should not be treated like an individual attribute or characteristic. Social psychological scholars of social class have revealed how social class and its psychological and behavioral effects are necessarily contingent on the material and social resources that one can access in a particular context. For example, due to the impact of the Great Recession, about 25% of North American households saw a reduction of at least 75% of their wealth between 2007 and 2011 (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Many other countries were also affected, such as Iceland, where the collapse of its banks completely erased the savings of 50,000 people, a significant portion of the country’s population of about 300,000 at the time (Boyes, 2009). As a result, people who were quite wealthy during that time period were likely no longer considered higher-class after the sudden loss of these material resources. Alternatively, if someone in a lower-class context were to win millions in the lottery, these newfound financial resources may prompt others and society to consider this person as much higher-class than they were before.<sup>5</sup> In other words, people can only attain and retain a higher-class position in society to the extent that the necessary resources are available to them.

## The Need to Consider Four Interacting Levels of Culture

Taking a social-class-in-context perspective also means recognizing the ways in which available resources impact psychology and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Hamedani et al., 2024; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Consider the insights we would miss if we were to examine only one level of culture in isolation – for example, the individual level. In the context of education, one common question people ask about social class is the following: Why do students in lower-class contexts tend to be less confident and assertive than their peers in higher-class contexts (e.g., Belmi et al., 2020)? Focusing only on the individual level might lead to deficit narratives, or the erroneous idea that students in lower-class contexts are essentially different from and naturally less confident than their higher-class counterparts. Indeed, research clearly documents that these deficit narratives can undermine not only students’ academic experiences (e.g., sense of belonging) but also their performance in school (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; Johnson et al., 2011; Valencia, 1997). This narrow focus on the individual level would also hinder understanding of the ways in which social class contexts create and maintain social class differ-

<sup>5</sup> Changes in material resources would also likely be accompanied by similar changes in social resources. For example, if one were to lose material resources, as well as power and status, such a change would also likely produce less access to influential social networks.

<sup>6</sup> Cultural psychologists break down culture into these four components to analyze its effects (Hamedani & Markus, 2019).



**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.

ences. That is, we would not be able to fully appreciate how ideas, interactions, and institutions interact with the individual level to create and maintain these social class differences.

If we instead adopt a social-class-in-context perspective, this means going beyond the single-level focus on individuals and 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 differences 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* (i.e., social structures that provide and legitimize a set of rules), such as schools in lower-class contexts, can foster humility and an emphasis on being just 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 not to stand out, but to instead 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 other people – within families and schools could further foster this tendency toward humility. For example, parents and teachers often seek to instill humility by setting clear boundaries and by indicating to children when their claims or assertions are factually incorrect (Miller & Sperry,

1987, 2012; Miller et al., 2005). In doing so, they 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., Anyon, 1981; Lareau, 2003; MacLeod, 2009; Piff et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2007, 2013). 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. Attention to 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. Consider, for example, the tendency for parents of children in higher-class contexts in the United States to be more involved in their children's school activities – and to question teachers' decisions more often – than parents in lower-class contexts (e.g., Lareau & Conley, 2008). This social class difference is not just created at the individual level by parents who want to be more engaged and involved in school. Instead, this difference is reinforced and maintained across levels of the culture cycle. For instance, institutional policies that reward and expect parental involvement can privilege parents from higher-class contexts, who typically have more free time and flexibility in their jobs. The greater involvement encouraged by these policies can, in turn, shape parents' comfort levels with teachers and their willingness to question or challenge the teachers' decisions. Thus, the individual behavior we observe (e.g., being more involved) is often sustained by hard-to-see elements of culture that interact and reinforce each other. These interacting forces lean toward reproducing themselves in the absence of intervention.

With a greater awareness of the multiple, intersecting factors that create and sustain these social class differences in behavior, we are better positioned to understand why interventions designed to change behavior (e.g., to increase parental involvement in school) so often fail. To the extent that interventions only address one level of culture (e.g., at the individual level: creating greater interest in engagement), 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; Hamedani et al., 2024; Stephens et al., 2012, 2021). For example, even if people are equipped with a new mindset that appreciates the benefits of involvement in school, they would also need support at an institution level – policies and practices that make that involvement possible without taking time off from work (e.g., to host school activities on the weekends when working parents have a greater chance to attend). Access to greater involvement would need to be reinforced by interactions with family and friends who also have had positive experiences with becoming more involved in their children's schools. These interactions, in turn, would need to be supported by ideas in the local social class context that suggest that becoming involved in my children's school is the kind of thing that “people like me” can and should do (Oyserman et al., 2007).



## A SOCIAL-CLASS-IN-CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### The Need to Describe Social Class Using Language That Foregrounds Contexts

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 characterizing 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 can essentialize and individualize 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 obscure the contextual reality of how social class is produced and reinforce societal power dynamics (e.g., in education; Browman & Miele, 2024; Darnon et al., 2024; Doyle & Easterbrook, 2024; Miller et al., 2024).

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.” For example, some researchers have described students as “from lower-SES backgrounds” (Silverman et al., 2023). Similarly, others have used the language “people from working-class backgrounds” (Dittmann et al., 2024; Goudeau et al., 2024). Although these statements are less concise, we suggest that they provide a more accurate portrayal of how social class is produced and maintained. In turn, these types of context-focused statements should reorient researchers and practitioners away from essentializing individuals 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 (Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Stephens et al., *in press*).

### Measuring Social Class: Current Approaches and Challenges

Social psychologists have measured social class in many different ways, and there are very few commonly accepted standards for how to do so (Antonoplis, 2023; Stephens et al., *in press*). 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 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 & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2011). 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”). In contrast, 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 within a single paper or across 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 separate the study of social class from the contexts that create it (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007). As discussed more extensively in our Handbook of Social Psychology Chapter on social class (Stephens et al., *in press*), composite measures can hinder our understanding of the psychological effects of the particular material and social resources available in people's social class contexts (Bornstein et al., 2003; Chakraborty, 2002; Duncan & Magnuson, 2002; Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Krieger et al., 1997; Liberatos et al., 1988; Mechanic, 1989). This can be a significant problem for researchers who seek to document the relationship between specific material or social resources and their psychological and behavioral correlates (see also Antonoplis, 2023). Although a composite approach documents the effects of *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 also 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. This disconnect between the labels used and actual resources available in the context can create challenges to understanding the impact of those resources.<sup>7</sup>

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 research focused on the experiences of first-generation college students, consider the impact of using different resources to measure social class. Using educational attainment as a measure, a first study could show that students from lower-class contexts (measured as having parents without 4-year degrees) are more likely to report the experience of family achievement guilt in higher education compared to students from higher-class contexts (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). Then, using income as a measure, a second study could show that students from lower-class contexts (measured as having a household income of less than \$50,000 a year) more often feel tension or experience conflicts with their families after leaving home to attend college. Although these effects converge conceptually, we do not know if income would have predicted family achievement guilt, or if education would have predicted conflict with one's family. Indeed, it was necessary for Covarrubias and colleagues (2020) to examine multiple measures of resources simultaneously to learn that the experiences reported by students from lower-class contexts diverged across different measures of resources (i.e., parental educational attainment vs. family income).<sup>8</sup> Reporting only income or education in a given study can therefore limit our

<sup>7</sup> Despite this disconnect between specific resources and psychological and behavioral outcomes, proponents of this approach would argue a key benefit of a composite approach is that it captures a wide range of material and social resources simultaneously, thus representing a fuller picture of the construct.

<sup>8</sup> A recent study by Covarrubias and colleagues (2020) found that students from lower-class contexts (measured with parental educational attainment) reported higher levels of family achievement guilt related to leaving family behind, having more privileges, becoming different, and experiencing pressures compared to students from higher-class contexts. Yet, students from lower-class contexts (measured with family income) only reported higher levels of guilt related to having

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 and which are consistent across indicators (see also Antonoplis, 2023; Pollak & Wolfe, 2020).

## Implications of a Social-Class-in-Context Perspective for Measuring Social Class

To overcome some of these challenges, we suggest that researchers allow their research question and theoretical approach to guide which social class measures they use in a given project or paper (see Antonoplis, 2023; Lareau & Conley, 2008, for a discussion). 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). Moreover, as explained earlier, we define social class as a positioning in the hierarchy based on access to valued material and social resources. Conceptualizing social class in this way suggests the importance of measuring social class to most closely capture the valued resources of people's social class contexts, which in turn afford power and status in that setting.

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 more directly than subjective measures of power and status. For example, having a high-prestige occupation (e.g., investment banking) tells us something specific about the material and social resources to which one is likely to have access. Indeed, someone with this type of occupation would likely have access to friends or colleagues who could loan them money. Moreover, this type of occupation will tell us something specific about the amount of wealth or income a given person is likely to have. Indeed, an analyst in investment banking on average will earn about \$139,750 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Having this income means that a person (and their family, if applicable) has a specific amount of money to spend on a yearly basis. We also learn what this income can buy someone relative to the cost of various basic expenses (i.e., rent, food, etc.) in their neighborhood or geographic region.<sup>9</sup>

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) captures people's relatively subjective experiences of power and status, the psychological affordances of material and social resources. We, therefore, suggest that these measures are one step removed from the actual resources of the contexts people inhabit. Subjective measures are based more on the experience or sense of power and status that people gain based on their access to and use of particular resources. While subjective measures can provide insights into the psychological effects of social class contexts by allowing people to consider additional experiences or resources that objective measures may not

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more privileges. In other words, they showed different patterns when they used different measures of resources, and it was necessary for them to test both measures for us to understand the nature of these patterns.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Johnson and colleagues (2011) used family household income as a measure of students' social class background across a series of studies examining the self-regulatory outcomes of students from lower-class backgrounds within the context of an elite university.

capture (e.g., Auger et al., 2024; Van Dijk et al., 2022), they can be problematic when used as a direct measure of people's material and social resources (Antonoplis, 2023). For instance, despite scoring lower on the objective measures of education, income, and occupation, Black Americans tend to rate themselves higher than White Americans on subjective social class on the MacArthur ladder (Shaked et al., 2016, as cited in Antonoplis, 2023).<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, measuring individuals' education, income, or occupation is a more direct proxy for the material and social 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, we suggest that they should prioritize the use of objective over subjective measures. Among the possible objective indicators that focus on the context, we and others have recently suggested that researchers should also consider which particular measure is most theoretically relevant to their research question (Antonoplis, 2023; Stephens et al., *in press*). Although this recommendation may sound intuitive, there is still an opportunity for researchers to take this idea more seriously. Indeed, as noted earlier, the vast majority of social psychological articles on social class do not define it (79%), and among the few remaining articles that do, definitions vary widely and lack consistency (Antonoplis, 2023).

To decide on a measure that is theoretically relevant, it is important to ask how – i.e., through what process or mechanism – will social class impact the expected outcome (see Antonoplis, 2023 for further discussion). For example, if one were interested in the effects of cultural mismatch on lower-class college students (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012), one might ask: What causes this mismatch? The theory suggests that students in lower-class contexts frequently rely on interdependent models of self, which diverge from the highly independent models of self commonly valued in higher education contexts. Why do these interdependent selves develop? The theory suggests that high school educated parents tend to socialize their children with the types of interdependent models of self that are effective in lower-class contexts (e.g., as early as 11 years old; Engstrom et al., 2024), but they often do not transmit the types of independent cultural capital, cultural norms, and models of self that are commonly valued in higher-class contexts of education (Dittmann et al., 2020; Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens, Fryberg et al., 2012). Stated differently, these cultural differences in models of self are theorized to be a product of differential access to educational attainment. Therefore, when these types of cultural differences, models of self, or identities are the focus of research, we suggest that 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, on the other hand, 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.

<sup>10</sup> Shaked and colleagues (2016) offer two possible explanations for the tendency for Black Americans to rate themselves as higher in subjective social class compared to White Americans. The first is rooted in social identity theory which suggests that individuals develop their self-concepts in relation to their in-group. Due to the self-protective properties of in-group comparisons (Crocker & Major, 1989), people are less inclined to consider factors that disadvantage their entire group when making in-group comparisons. Second, since people are motivated to maintain positive self-concepts, Black Americans may prioritize elements of their lives that are within their control (e.g., sleep, diet, physical activity; Goodin et al., 2010; Reitzel et al., 2013), rather than focusing on the collective disadvantages they face, when rating themselves on subjective social class.

## 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 examine 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. In fact, this is an approach many scholars have adopted in the context of education (Anderson et al., 2014; Owens, 2018; Owens & Candipan, 2019; Pearman, 2019; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2021). For example, Votruba-Drzal and colleagues (2021) investigated how family income and neighborhood characteristics both contribute to disparities in achievement, executive functioning skills, and externalizing behavior problems (e.g., arguing and fighting) between children from lower- and higher-class backgrounds. They found that family household income is associated with children's neighborhood characteristics (i.e., violent crime, air pollution, socioeconomic advantage, socioeconomic disadvantage). These community features, in turn, influence children's reading and math scores, cognitive flexibility, working memory, and their likelihood of engaging in behavioral problems at school. Examining both individual-level and community-level resources enabled them to better understand the psychological or behavioral effects of social class. Furthermore, it would be illuminating to understand the circumstances under which individual income or neighborhood median income is more predictive of a person's psychological tendencies or behavior.

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 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, as research has begun to investigate, how does the intersection of social class with race/ethnicity and gender impact the models of self that guide people's psychology and behavior (Harackiewicz et al., 2016)?

## CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, social psychology has increasingly recognized how understanding psychology and behavior is only possible with a recognition of a person's positioning within the social class hierarchy. Indeed, most social psychologists have come to adopt what we refer to as a social-class-in-context perspective – one that acknowledges that social class is not a property of individuals, but instead created and sustained over time by contextual differences in access to material and social resources. Although most researchers' theories recognize the ways in which contexts matter for psychology and behavior, we suggest here that taking this perspective seriously also requires some additional steps in the future: adopting a context-focused definition of social class; investigating the multiple levels of culture that create social class differences in psychology and behavior; using language to describe participants that reflects the context-contingent nature of social class; and measuring social class in a way that provides a better understanding of the link between contextual resources and their psychological and behavioral correlates. Taking these steps will enrich and further develop our understanding of the multilevel processes through which the particular material and social resources of the social class contexts foster psychological tendencies and behavior. In turn, this deeper understanding will enable social psychologists to create more effective interventions, including those designed to address socioeconomic inequalities in education.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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