Social Class

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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. It shapes people's trust in government and their votes on issues such as gun control, abortion rights, and marriage equality (Cooper, 2015; Galston, 2014; McQuarrie, 2017; Prysby, 2020; Schaffner et al., 2018; Van der Waal et al., 2007). Social class 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). The implications of these social class differences for psychology and behavior are significant; they profoundly influence people's chances of gaining access to the educational opportunities and cultural capital that can 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, 2022). Those who have access to more of the "right" ways of being are judged as having greater worth or value, while those who have less of these 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 a profound impact on life opportunities and outcomes (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Connor et al., 2021; Côté et al., 2015; Hoff & Laursen, 2019; Waldron, 2007), even more so than in the recent past (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2004). For example, in the United States, skyrocketing rates of inequality have coincided with higher rates of health disparities over time (Chetty et al., 2016). Higher rates of inequality have also 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, is linked with a widening of 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 is associated with wealthy parents devoting 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).

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 society. It has led large segments of the population, especially the White working-class, to question ideas that they previously took 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 Destin et al., 2022; Cooper, 2015; Day & Fiske, 2017; DeOrtentiis et al., 2022; Galston, 2014). Instead, many now believe 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 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 when elites judge and label working-class Americans as "inferior" and "deficient," those being judged feel the need to challenge the very norms, values, and institutions that 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 societal changes and recognition of the importance of social class in explaining behavior, this is the first chapter in the history of *The Handbook of Social Psychology* to focus on social class. In this chapter, we propose that understanding how social class shapes psychology and behavior requires a social-class-in-context perspective. This perspective means paying attention to the different social class *contexts* that guide individuals' psychology and behavior through four interacting levels of culture: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals.

In the following sections, we first define social class 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, building on classic theories from sociology and economics, we describe and compare the two most influential social psychological theories of how social class shapes psychology and behavior: 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 across four levels of culture. Finally, we identify important future directions for the study of social class within social psychology.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CLASS?

Perhaps because social class is a relatively new topic of inquiry in social psychology, scholars have rarely defined it precisely (Antonoplis, 2023). Instead, most social psychological 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 reflects existing social psychological definitions that describe social class in general terms, as consisting of a range of material and social resources (e.g., financial assets), but do not provide a specific or substantive description of what social class is. Indeed, most social psychological definitions do not clarify if social class is equivalent to financial assets, a position in a social hierarchy, a social context, or a social category. Moreover, existing definitions do not clarify how material and social resources (e.g., financial assets) relate to other key components of social class, such as power and status.

Drawing on decades of theory in psychology, sociology, and economics (e.g., Marx, Weber, Bourdieu), we propose a novel definition that goes beyond prior definitions of social class by providing a more comprehensive and detailed depiction of what social class *is* and how its key elements (e.g., material and social resources, power and status) relate to each other. Although social class can function as an important social category or identity, it necessarily functions as a *positioning*—a position in the social hierarchy that is subject to change through ongoing interactions with others (e.g., Markus & Moya, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Stephens, Markus & Fryberg, 2012; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Accordingly, 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.[1] These resources often include but are not limited to education, financial assets, and occupation.

As shown in Figure 1, we refer to environments that differ in their available material and social resources as *social class contexts*. As a result of these resource differences, social class contexts also differ in proximal *psychological affordances* (i.e., power and status) and downstream *cultural affordances* (i.e., psychology and behavior across four levels of culture). We use the term *material and social resources* to refer to the broad set of features that characterize these contexts: not only opportunities for educational attainment and access to financial assets and occupations, but also features such as the safety of one's neighborhood, quality of one's school, the type of socialization that families provide, and opportunities for choice, influence, and control. Social class contexts can create a meaningful divide in psychology and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture (i.e., ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals). However, these contexts are not monolithic or impermeable. People can move in and out of these contexts, and can vary in their access to specific resources, such as the amount of educational attainment or income. Indeed, not everyone in a given lower-class (or higher-class) context has the same level of education, amount of financial assets, and type of occupation. For example, some people may be low (or high) on all three of these, whereas others have a mix of levels.

Figure 1: How Social Class Is Created

Social Class Contexts
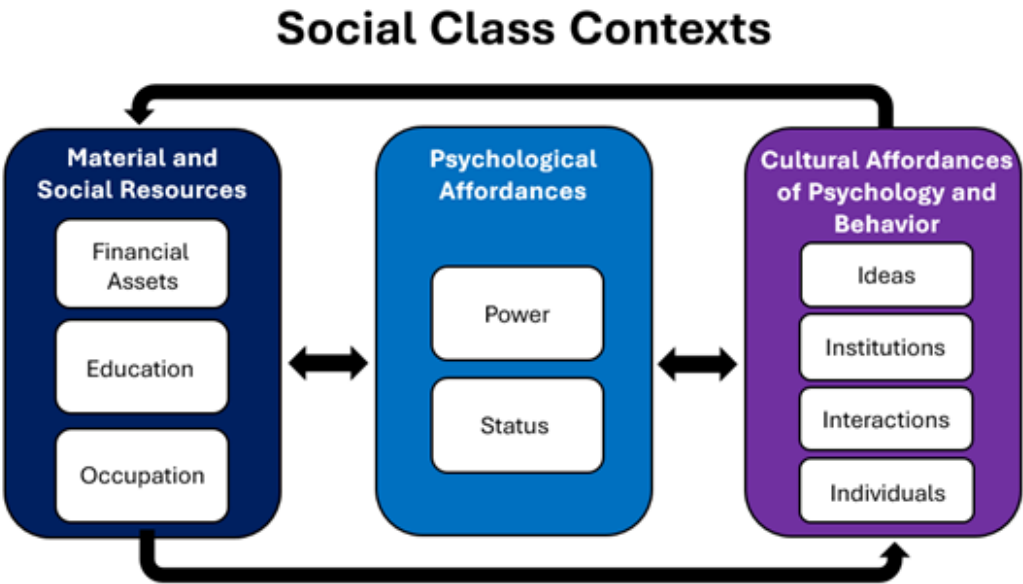
Note: By the term "financial assets," we refer to the income, wealth, and monetary resources people have available to them.

When people have access to the material and social resources that are valued in a given context, they can claim higher levels of power and status, and other people are also more likely to grant them that power and status. Their particular levels of power and status will, in turn, influence their positioning in the social class hierarchy. *Power* is derived from the material and social resources of the context, 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 give an individual (Fast et al., 2012; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022).

In most countries across the globe, one's level of education, financial assets, and type of occupation are key sources of power and status, and, in turn, social class. For example, a person who has a four-year college degree will typically be afforded more power and status than a person with a high school degree. This additional power and status will then translate into a higher position in the social class hierarchy. If this person gains access to additional education, they will be afforded additional power and status and thus an even higher position in the social class hierarchy. Furthermore, when people have access to these resources in different social class contexts over time, the chronic experiences of having high (or low) power and status will foster a constellation of downstream cultural affordances. We refer to these cultural affordances as psychological and behavioral tendencies across the four levels of culture (see Figure 1).

Social class is, therefore, much more than the momentary experience of either power or status in any immediate situation. Instead, it is a relatively more stable positioning in the social class hierarchy based on having access to resources (e.g., educational attainment), which afford more chronic levels 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 or identities such as race, gender, social class, or nation of origin. 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 incorporates both objective and subjective elements: access to material and social resources, which are relatively objective, and their psychological affordances (power and status), which are relatively subjective.[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 resources into class-specific lifestyle indicators, tastes, and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1977, 1995; Swartz, 1997). Building on these

approaches, most social psychologists measure social class in a way that acknowledges the critical importance of both objective and subjective elements (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

Thus far, we have defined social class as though it is separate from other social categories. Although most research on social class has treated it in this monolithic fashion, social class is necessarily intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991). In other words, social class always intersects with other social categories, identities, and contexts, such as gender, race or ethnicity, age, nation of origin, religion, disability status, veteran status, sexuality, and politics. These intersections are not randomly distributed: in the case of race or ethnicity, people who are Black, Latinx, or Native American tend to hold a lower position in the social class hierarchy than people who are White (Reeves et al., 2016; M. Thomas & Moye, 2015). For instance, Black families have access to far fewer financial assets— only about 10% of the median wealth—of White families (Bricker et al., 2017).

The psychological and behavioral effects of social class are also shaped by its intersections with other important social categories. Stated differently, the consequences of social class for psychology and behavior are not the same for people who differ based on other social categories (e.g., gender or race/ethnicity; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). For example, women in higher-class contexts—who are often stereotyped as uncommitted to their work—have a different set of experiences in workplace settings than women in lower-class contexts or men in higher-class contexts (e.g., Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). As we move forward with our review of research on social class, it is important to acknowledge that intersectionality informs the effects of social class. We return to a discussion of intersectionality in future directions.

## Social Class Shapes Psychology And Behavior Across Four Levels Of Culture

Our definition of social class describes it as a positioning in a social hierarchy that is rendered meaningful through people's participation in social class contexts. As noted above, social class contexts are environments that differ in their available material and social resources, psychological affordances, and downstream cultural 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, as noted above, 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).[3]

To understand how social class shapes psychology and behavior, it is critical to take a social-class-in-context perspective. This focus on social class contexts offers at least two key insights. First, social class is not an individual attribute or characteristic that people "have" in the traditional meaning of the word. Instead, social class contexts afford individuals' positions in the social class hierarchy. In other words, people can only gain access to the material and social resources—and resulting power and status—that create their social class to the extent that those resources are available in their contexts. Consider the powerful influences of the social class contexts in which one was raised: there is an almost perfectly linear relationship between the incomes of parents and their children (Chetty et al., 2014). Indeed, about 60% of income differences between families are passed on from one generation to the next (Mazumder, 2005).

Second, just as social class contexts shape individuals' opportunity to gain access to a given position in the hierarchy, so too do these contexts shape the resulting social class differences in psychology and behavior. Indeed, a social-class-in-context perspective involves recognizing how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at 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 systematically analyze its effects (see Figure 2; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). To take seriously the role of social class contexts, it is critical to first attend to the material and social resources of people's contexts (e.g., access to financial resources, neighborhoods, socialization). Second, one must consider how people's experiences in these contexts shape psychological tendencies and behavior across the four interacting levels of culture.

Figure 2: The Four Interacting Levels of Culture
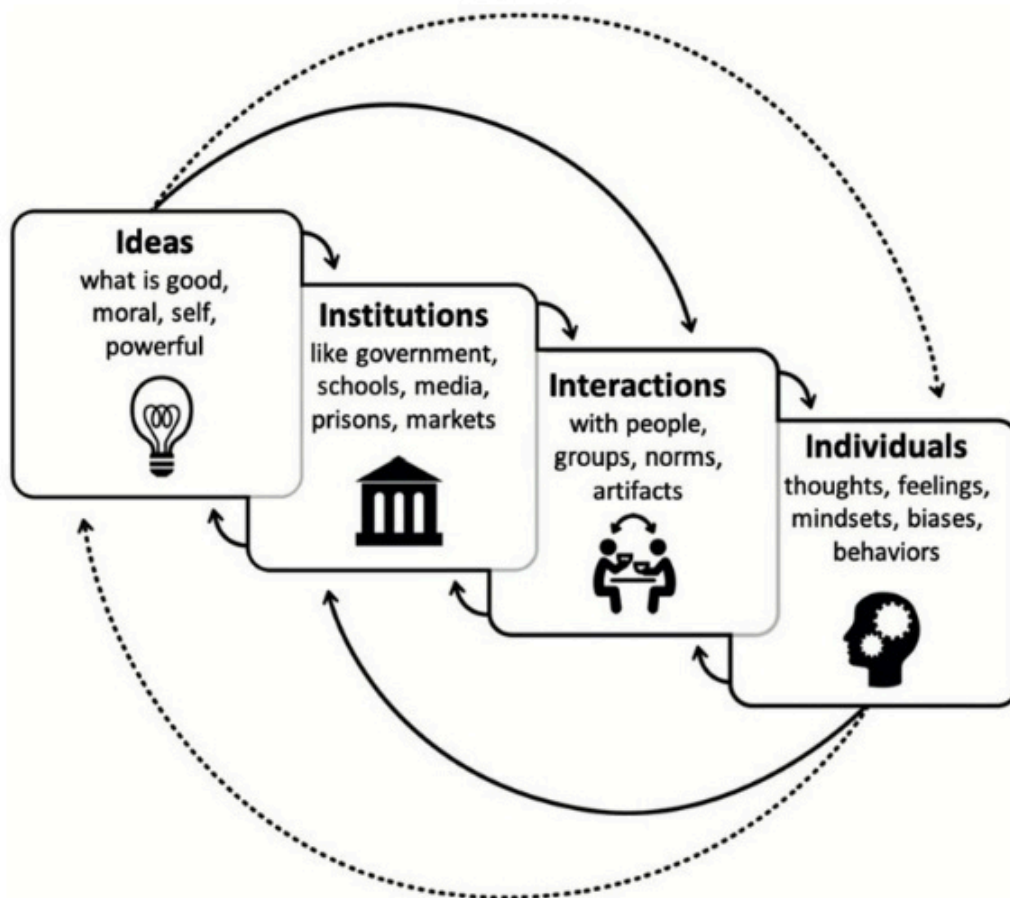
Note: Adapted from Hamedani and Markus (2019). Copyright 2019 by Hamedani and Markus.

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, it would obscure the contextual sources of this difference and could thereby lead to the erroneous inference that the value of conformity is an essential characteristic of people in lower-class contexts. Second, this focus would render invisible the additional three interacting levels of culture (interactions, institutions, and individuals) that work with the idea level to reproduce these social class differences.

Going beyond this single-level focus, our social-class-in-context perspective would examine 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 other three 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 often have fewer financial resources, typically have larger class sizes and therefore tend to 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 prepare them for the types of roles and occupations that they are most likely to have in the future. Finally, moving to the individual level, people in lower-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, taking into account 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 challenging to reduce, especially when intervention efforts 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 changes in behavior are likely to 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 "someone like me" can and should invest in the future. These ideas need to be reinforced through interactions with family and friends who have had the opportunity to learn how to plan for the future, *and* these ideas and

interactions would need support from institutions that provide valuable information and material resources (see C. C. Thomas et al., 2020).

Table 1: Glossary of Terms

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 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
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 resources (including financial resources, educational attainment, and occupation); psychological affordances (i.e., power and status); and downstream cultural affordances (i.e., psychology and behavior across four levels of culture)
Four levels of culture	Ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals: the four sites of social class differences that must be considered to fully understand how social class shapes psychology and behavior

Operationalizing Social Class

The methods that we use in social psychology to measure social class build on a long tradition of research in health psychology (e.g., Adler & Stewart, 2010; Hughes et al., 2022; Khullar & Chokshi, 2018; Mein, 2020). Although this chapter conceptualizes social class as a positioning in a hierarchy that is created by one's experiences 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, income, or occupational prestige. In the case of educational attainment, research often refers to people who have a high school level of education as in working-class contexts and people who have a four-year degree as 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 characterized by relatively lower versus higher

resources, we refer to people *in* lower-class versus higher-class *contexts*. People have both current social class contexts and background contexts. When people are currently in different social class contexts, we refer to them as in lower- or higher-class contexts; when people were raised in different social class contexts, we refer to them as *from* higher-class versus lower-class *backgrounds*. For example, first-generation college students come from lower-class backgrounds, but by virtue of attending college, they are currently in the higher-class context of higher education. 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 foundational role of the social class contexts in which those people participate. Instead, by referring to people in contexts, we suggest that social class is inextricably linked to and produced through participation in social class contexts.

By adopting this terminology, we do not mean to suggest that all people 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 resources that people in different environments are likely to have access 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 resources. 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). Although far from perfect, this approach assumes that these individual measures provide insight into and serve as a proxy for the material and social resources of social class contexts. For example, although income is often assessed at an individual level, this measure does not capture a characteristic or feature of the person in the same way that a measure of personality would (e.g., extroverted); instead, it is an indicator of how many resources a person has access to in their context. In the case of educational attainment, having a four-year degree reflects a set of experiences of being socialized in a particular higher-class context over time. Nevertheless, considering the limitations of these measures, it is also fruitful to consider which measures best capture the resources available in social class contexts. We explore this issue further in the general discussion.

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 to 15 years, this trend has shifted: the field of social psychology now dedicates significant attention to social class. To better understand this increased interest, we focus on the historical context of the United States—a key site of social class research. The newfound attention to social class 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). In 2011, for example, Occupy Wall Street mobilized people in response to these reduced opportunities with the widely popularized slogan "we are the 99%" (Greene, 2011).

Consider how resources available in social class contexts—and the opportunities they afford—shifted from the 1930s until the early 2000s, when social psychology adopted social class as a core topic. During the 1950s, 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 largely 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 increasingly turned their attention to social class. This shift was accompanied by two meaningful changes in how scholars approach the topic. First, scholars shifted from treating social class as an incidental factor in research to developing approaches that center social class in their theorizing. For example, some early studies used social class as one lens through which to study person perception (e.g., Kraut & Poe, 1980), but lacked a theory of how social class shaped psychology and behavior more generally. It was not until recently that scholars developed general social psychological theories of social class. Second, in considering social class differences, research has shifted from focusing on 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 comprehensive, but rather a way to highlight key characteristics of each wave and identify notable papers that catalyzed major shifts from one wave to the next. Table 2 provides n overview of the four waves and some of the most common research topics within each. The story begins with a *Deficit* wave (1930–1993), before turning to a *Psychosocial Influence* wave (1994–2004), a *Building the Theoretical Foundation* wave (2005–2011), and finally, the most recent *Proposing and Testing Theories* wave (2012–2023) and beyond.

Table 2: **Major Topics of Research during Each of Four Waves**

Wave	Time Period	Common Topics of Research and Example Citations
Deficit	1930–1993	• Deficits in individual traits (e.g., intelligence, IQ; Jensen, 1968) • Life outcomes (Dohrenwend, 1973) • Incidental topics (e.g., stereotyping and prejudice, person perception; Darley & Gross, 1983)
Psychosocial Influences	1994–2004	• Classism, prejudice, and intergroup interactions (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Kay & Jost, 2003) • Health and well-being (Adler et al., 1994; Chen, 2004)
Building the Theoretical Foundation	2005–2011	• Culture, agency, self, and identity (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007) • Contextualist thinking, emotion, and empathic accuracy (Kraus et al., 2009; Kraus et al., 2010) • Health and well-being (Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Johnson & Krueger, 2006)
Proposing and Testing Theories	2012–2023 and Beyond	• Decision-making (Côté et al., 2013; Kraus & Keltner, 2013) • Prosocial behavior (Piff et al., 2012) • Cultural mismatch theory (Dittmann et al., 2020; Phillips, Stephens, et al., 2020; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012) • Close relationships (Carey & Markus, 2017; Emery & Finkel, 2022; Karney, 2021) • Social mobility (Browman et al., 2017; Davidai, 2018) • Academic interventions (Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Hernandez et al., 2021; Stephens, Hamedani, et al., 2014) • Health and well-being (Brody et al., 2013; Chen & Miller, 2012)

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. 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. We locate the start of this first wave in 1930, although there were a few earlier papers on social class (e.g., Chapin, 1928; Pressey & Ralston, 1919). Starting in the 1930s, papers about social class began to be published across multiple consecutive years.

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). Although deficit-oriented research proliferated during this period, research inspired by these assumptions of social class deficits still lingers in subsequent waves and more contemporary research (Silverman, Rosario, et al., 2023).

Additional studies in the Deficit wave did not take a deficit approach but 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, in which researchers focused on psychosocial influences.

Psychosocial Influence (1994–2004)

The next wave, which we term the Psychosocial Influence wave, began in 1994 when Nancy 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. Specifically, they transitioned from the basic assumption of the Deficit wave—that people in lower-class contexts have deficits—to 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 culture, but also began to incorporate the idea and interaction levels.

Research in the Psychosocial Influence 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. Research also began to examine how social class interacts with specific social situations, daily life experiences, and interactions with others. For instance, a new focus on classism, prejudice, and intergroup interactions appeared (Blascovich et al., 2001; Croizet & Claire, 1998; Kay & Jost, 2003).

This wave foreshadowed two shifts that emerged in subsequent waves. 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), which contributed to interventions created in the next two waves. Second, researchers developed theories of power that planted the seeds for theoretical perspectives on social class (Keltner et al., 2003), which built the foundation for social-cognitive theory that researchers began to develop in the next wave.

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. For example, this paper demonstrated that people in higher-class contexts prefer cultural products (e.g., music lyrics) that emphasize influence, uniqueness, and control over one's environment, whereas people in lower-class contexts prefer cultural products that emphasize adjusting the self to others, maintaining integrity, and resisting influence. 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 Influence wave's focus on the subjective interpretation of situations to incorporate a broader focus on sociocultural contexts. In doing so, it 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 worse 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 laid the groundwork for the sociocultural theory that we describe in the next 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 (2012–2023 And Beyond)

In 2012, a watershed moment for social class research 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, there was a notable increase in new areas of research on social class, such as intersectionality, interventions, social class as an identity, and links between social class and close relationships (Harackiewicz et al., 2014;

Carey & Markus, 2017; Destin et al., 2017; Emery & Finkel, 2022; Masarik et al., 2016; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Yeager et al., 2016). At the time this chapter was written (2023), this wave was still going strong.

The previous three waves of research built the foundation for the two major theories that emerged during this wave. Social-cognitive theory explains psychology and behavior by focusing on rank and resources, which afford different opportunities for behavior. This theory focuses 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., 2013; Kraus & Keltner, 2013); and signals of social class (Kraus, Torrez, Park, & Ghayebi, 2019). By contrast, sociocultural theory focuses on the chronic material and social resources 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), and how institutions create and maintain social class cultural differences (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Theoretical papers from these two perspectives and empirical work investigating their predictions were published in this wave.

At the same time, two more theories of social class, which were domain specific rather than general, emerged. Scarcity theory focused on how limited financial resources affects financial decision-making (Shah et al., 2012, 2018). For instance, work from the scarcity perspective finds that thoughts about money are more readily activated for people in lower-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-class backgrounds are buffered from adverse health outcomes if they experienced a warm family environment growing up (Chen et al., 2011). Unlike 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 relatively new domains, such as close relationships (Emery & Finkel, 2022; Ross et al., 2019; 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 perspectives (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 moved 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 and continued focal threads of research, such as links among 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

The two most influential theoretical perspectives on social class in the field of social psychology are social-cognitive and sociocultural. Our rationale for focusing on these two theories is twofold. First, they guide most of the social psychological research that we review below. Second, our goal is to focus on *general, social psychological* theories of social class—those that explain how social class shapes a wide range of psychology and behavior across domains.

Accordingly, within the field of social psychology, 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 specific questions such as why people engage in counterproductive financial decisions and how children find a path toward health and well-being, respectively. Moreover, we do not include classic theories (general or specific) outside the field of social psychology, such as those of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu, because these are sociological theories. We begin by outlining the basic tenets of the two main social psychological theories and then describe where they diverge from each other.

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 different social class contexts. These contexts, in turn, provide different opportunities for behavior, which afford particular patterns of psychological functioning and behavior.

*Figure 3*: Conceptual Model of Social-Cognitive Theory

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. 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 that is centered on individual goals, rewards, and internal states. For example, reflecting this individual orientation, people in higher-class contexts more often rely on internal 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 resources foster a more external orientation to the environment that is centered on responding to external constraints, threats, and other people (Kraus et al. 2011; 2012; 2019). Instead of relying on internal 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).

Sociocultural Theory

Like social-cognitive theory, sociocultural theory seeks to explain how social class contexts, which vary in available material and social resources and their 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- and higher-class contexts develop different cultural *models of self*–implicit understandings of oneself in relation to others and the social context (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). 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.

Figure 4: Conceptual Model of Sociocultural Theory
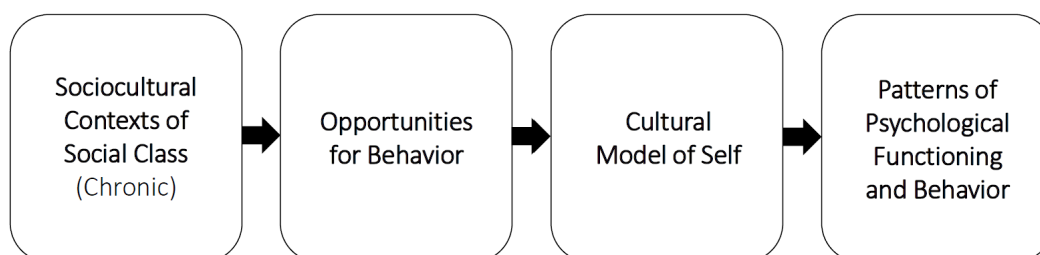
Lower-class contexts are characterized by material and social resources that encourage people to adjust and respond to the needs and preferences of others. For example, low levels of financial resources, coupled with corresponding limited opportunities for choice, influence, and control,

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, students from lower-class (versus 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 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, the limited resources and high levels of constraints in lower-class contexts mean that people in lower-class contexts need to rely on close others for support; these repeated experiences of relying on others translates into a preference for working together with others and promotes other values such as loyalty and solidarity (Carey & Markus, 2017; Dittmann et al., 2020).

In contrast, higher-class contexts are characterized by material and social resources 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 pave one's own path without others' material support. 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, students from higher-class backgrounds often attend higher education with the motivations of paving their own paths and developing their own individual selves. This independent model, in turn, affords 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).

Comparing Social-Cognitive And Sociocultural Theories

There are four key differences between the two major theories of social class: (a) the focus on situational versus chronic social class; (b) whether the effects of social class are regarded as specific to the sociocultural context; (c) the theorized mediating process between social class and psychological functioning and behavior; and (d) 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). Participants are typically presented with an adapted version of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, which includes a ladder with 10 rungs "representing where people stand in the United States." (Adler et al., 2000). They are 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 lower-class contexts 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 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). 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, [...] 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 different types of sociocultural contexts (e.g., national contexts). According to social-cognitive theory, rank and resources should have similar effects on psychology and behavior across sociocultural 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, some research documents similar effects of social class across different national contexts (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Miyamoto, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2018). For example, research across 60 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 resources available in one's 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 that intersect with other 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 resources (e.g., a $200,000 income) available in one's social class contexts. 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 differ in some respects across the national contexts of the United States and Japan. For example, in contrast to the typically observed link between higher social class and more self-oriented psychological tendencies, 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 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 pattern emerges because low levels of material resources and frequent environmental constraints orient a person's attention to contextual factors that are relevant in any given situation (Kraus et al., 2009; Kraus et al., 2010). In other words, this theory would focus on the different opportunities for behavior that create different psychological patterns. 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 access to different opportunities for behavior over time fosters different models of self. Specifically, sociocultural theory would claim that low levels of resources and frequent constraints produce different behaviors over time (e.g., more attention to the context) that foster the interdependent selves that are more common in lower-class contexts. In turn, sociocultural theory would theorize that these interdependent selves afford an understanding of the self as connected to and responsive to the context, and, therefore, orient a person more generally to contextual attributions. In other words, this theory would focus on different models of self as the key mediating mechanism through which different social class contexts foster different psychological patterns.

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). Indeed, 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 a shaper of—the four levels of culture. 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).

In sum, social-cognitive and sociocultural theories guide much of the existing literature focused on social class within the field of social psychology. Overall, these theories are more alike than different in their emphasis on social class contexts—and the resources they afford—as central to social class differences in psychology and behavior. Yet as described above, these theories also have a number of meaningful differences in their focus on situational versus chronic social class, whether the effects of social class are regarded as culture-specific, the theorized mediating process, and the emphasis on different levels of culture.

In the following four sections, we review the social psychological literature on social class. 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. We do so because considering all four interacting levels of culture is crucial to fully understand the relationship between social class and psychological functioning and behavior. This approach enables an understanding of the multiple, intersecting forces that both create and maintain social class inequalities, as well as the multilevel focus that is often necessary to reduce these inequalities.

SOCIAL CLASS CONTEXTS SHAPE PSYCHOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR ACROSS FOUR LEVELS OF CULTURE

As we describe in detail below, social class contexts shape psychology and behavior across the four levels of culture. It shapes 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 (Côté et al., 2021). These foundational ideas further shape people's *interactions* with others; for example, whether they prioritize loyalty and solidarity in their closest relationships (Carey & Markus, 2017). Finally, these ideas guide *individuals'* patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting; for example, whether they are more prosocial or are instead more self-interested (Korndörfer 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 themselves via cultural models of self. Second, we review how social class contexts afford particular ideas about ethics or morality. Finally, we consider how social class contexts shape a broad array of cultural ideas that relate to people's understanding of what social class is and where it comes from, which we refer to as *lay theories of social class*.

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. As noted earlier, 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* refers broadly to one's understanding not just of the self but also of behavior and "how to be" a person in the world (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Although the term *models of agency* conveys 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*.

Social class contexts with different material and social resources 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). 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, and influence; and have 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 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). A person guided by this model will be more likely to make situational attributions and 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. A classic sociological work in the 1960s showed that jobs available in lower-class contexts enabled less choice, control, and self-direction than those in higher-class contexts, and therefore fostered 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 contemplated individuation and differentiation from their family. Based on an intensive interview study comparing White "working-class" and "professional middle-class families," Lilian Rubin concluded: "For [the working class], 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 sociological insights, social psychological research has documented how different social class contexts, which differ in material and social resources, 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). 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 participants in lower-class contexts evaluated their pens comparably regardless of whether they chose them or not, suggesting that choice was less central to their models of self. Not only does the preference for choice differ by social class—so too does the meaning of choice. People in higher-class contexts more often use choice to express differentiation and separation from others, whereas people in lower-class contexts more often use choice to express similarity to and connection with others (Stephens et al., 2007; see also Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). For example, when presented with a scenario in which a friend buys a car identical

to theirs, people in higher-class contexts more often interpret this choice as a threat to their uniqueness, whereas people in lower-class contexts more often view this as an opportunity for group solidarity (e.g., "Let's start a car club"). Subsequent research suggests that this preference for difference and separation derives from a more independent model of self, whereas the preference for similarity and connection derives from 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). This tendency to exhibit hard interdependence can be helpful for protecting the self from the increased dangers or risks that characterize lower-class contexts. For example, an interview study with Hurricane Katrina survivors found that survivors from lower-class contexts—those who were most in harm's way—talked more often about the importance of caring for and connecting with others, and being tough and strong, compared to survivors from higher-class contexts. Reflecting this sentiment, one survivor stated: "I try not to let it get me down. I just let it make me stronger... cause I had to take care of my two sons" (Stephens et al., 2009). In contrast, the selves in higher-class contexts are characterized by *expressive independence*, a way of focusing not only on distinction and separation, but also influence, self-promotion, and self-expression (Stephens et al., 2014). This tendency to exhibit expressive independence is helpful both for individuating the self and for fully taking advantage of the abundant resources and opportunities that higher-class contexts offer. An interview study highlighted how mothers in higher-class contexts seek to cultivate their children's abilities to not only be independent but also express their unique forms of individuality. In these contexts, parenting is conceived of as "assisting the child gently in emerging, unfolding, flowering, and self-actualizing his or her own unique qualities, thoughts, and feelings" (Kusserow, 1999, p. 233).

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 some important differences in the effects of social class across nations.

Cultural ideas embedded in national contexts can shape the ways in which social class guides psychology and behavior, producing different effects across national contexts (Miyamoto et al., 2018). 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 additional 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, the opposite effect emerges in Japan, where 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. 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

Because 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[4] (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 self. That is, 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). This focus on individualizing morals reflects a more independent model of self. In contrast, people in lower-class contexts rely on a broader conception of morality that incorporates both individualizing and binding morals, such as purity concerns (Horberg et al., 2009). This attention to binding morals reflects a more independent model of self. Suggesting that these social class effects are distinct from similar patterns observed for political ideology, some research finds that effects of social class hold even after controlling for political conservatism (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 people in higher-class contexts are more likely to engage in 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., 2021) 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 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. In the 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 (Côté et al., 2013).

Lay Theories Of Social Class

In addition to people's ideas about the self and morality, social class contexts also shape a broad array of cultural ideas that relate to people's understanding of what social class is and where it comes from. These include belief in social mobility, essentialist beliefs about social class, attributions for the causes of poverty or inequality, 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).

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 effort (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). How might social class shape these beliefs in social mobility? Research on this topic has yielded mixed findings. Studies using subjective social class as a measure show people in higher-class contexts are more likely to overestimate social class mobility (Kraus & Tan, 2015), whereas other research using income as a measure of social class shows the opposite pattern (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). Social class is, therefore, one source of these beliefs about social mobility, but the nature of the effect may depend on how researchers measure social class.

Research has investigated other sources of these social mobility beliefs and their consequences. As for the sources, research finds that perceiving lower levels of inequality is associated with 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, Destin et al., 2022; see also Browman, Svoboda et al., 2022). More specifically, as inequality decreases, the external forces that lead some people to have a higher social class position become less salient (McCall et al., 2017). Therefore, people are more likely to attribute others' life outcomes to internal attributions, such as hard work or taking more initiative. As for the consequences of this belief in social mobility, research suggests 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).

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. For example, people in higher-class

contexts are more likely to endorse essentialist beliefs about social class (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). These beliefs can help people in higher-class contexts maintain a sense of deservingness, justifying one's privilege (see Phillips & Lowery, 2020). For example, the belief in social class essentialism is linked with less support for restorative justice (Kraus & Keltner, 2013).

Attributions for poverty

Internal attributions for poverty can serve a similar function as essentialist beliefs. An internal attribution for poverty emphasizes a personal characteristic (e.g., explaining poverty as due to people's work ethic), whereas a situational or contextual attribution emphasizes features of the context or the situation (e.g., explaining poverty as due to a lack of resources). Research suggests that internal attributions fuel victim-blaming and therefore decrease people's concern about inequality and their interest in reducing it (Birnbaum et al., 2023; Piff et al., 2020; see also Stephens et al., 2009). Although these types of cultural beliefs are often resistant to change, large external forces outside of personal control can shift people's beliefs in a more situational direction. For example, in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the more that people experienced loss of personal control through the experience of personal harm (e.g., losing a job), the more likely they were to endorse situational attributions for inequality (Birnbaum et al., 2023; 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. Perceivers often stereotype people in lower-class contexts as lazy and possessing negative attributes that help justify their lower position in the hierarchy (e.g., drug-abusers; Lindqvist et al., 2017; Loughnan et al., 2014). Perceivers also tend to dehumanize them as primitive, bestial, animalistic (Loughnan et al., 2014), and as feeling less pain than people in higher-class contexts (Summers et al., 2021; 2023). As is often the case with stereotypes, these perceptions do not vary by perceivers' own social class (Summers et al., 2021; 2023). In contrast, perceivers tend to stereotype people in higher-class contexts as competent and as having various positive attributes (e.g., hard-working, intelligent, healthy; Durante & Fiske, 2017). Although perceivers typically assign more positive—and fewer negative—attributes to people in higher-class contexts, stereotypes of both groups can be 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 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 and where it comes from.

Institutions

As we shift from the idea level 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, 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. Ideas about how to be a good or successful 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 next section focuses on how social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the institution level of culture. Because most social psychological research on institutions focuses on educational institutions and how they can impact the experiences and outcomes of students from lower-class backgrounds, we focus on educational institutions in our review. We first describe research that examines how educational institutions can disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds in terms of both psychological experience (e.g., a lack of fit) and academic outcomes (e.g., GPA). Then, considering how social class differentially shapes students' educational experiences, we provide an overview of research on interventions that take these experiences into account to level the playing field.

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 psychological experiences (e.g., lack of fit) that emerge through ongoing interactions of structures and individuals (Croizet et al., 2017; Dittmann & Stephens, 2017; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). The research reviewed below focuses on the role of psychological experiences.

Psychological experiences

Research in social psychology often focuses on how students with different social class backgrounds experience the "same" institution differently (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 (Cohen, 2022; Stephens, Brannon et al., 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, when students have a greater sense of fit or empowerment, they are more likely to engage academically (e.g., by attending class or studying) and, ultimately, perform better.

Research in this area focuses on identifying the background-specific obstacles that tend to undermine the fit, empowerment, and academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds (Ostrove, 2003; Johnson et al., 2011; Stephens, Brannon et al., 2015). These obstacles 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 (Herrmann & 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). For example, one illustrative study found that students in Chile from lower-class contexts were twice as likely to hold fixed, rather than growth, mindsets compared to students in higher-class contexts. Moreover, these fixed mindsets were associated with lower academic achievement, especially among students in lower-class contexts (Claro et al., 2016).

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 inadvertently position them as outsiders. This experience of exclusion plays a pivotal role in undermining students' experience of fit and empowerment, and, in turn, their academic outcomes.

Initial work in this area sought to identify how experiences with institutions can shape the type of self that one has the opportunity to become. One key theory was especially relevant to this domain: the concept of *possible selves*—people's image of who they might become in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Although most students from lower-class backgrounds have at least one possible self focused on school, institutions less often develop the "academic possible selves" of students from lower-class compared to higher-class backgrounds (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2006). For example, institutions less often expose them to representations of their group as high achieving in academic domains (D. E. Thomas et al., 2003).

Yet even if students do develop these academic possible selves, simply having access to them does not translate into academic behaviors, such as studying or doing homework. Students' possible selves need to be linked to behavioral strategies (e.g., how to study effectively for a test; Oyserman et al., 2004) that facilitate academic-related behavior. Theory and research on identity-based motivation further suggest that academic possible selves need to be on people's minds and feel relevant to their current selves to result in academic behavior in the future (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2007). Even beyond accessibility and relevance, people are only likely to engage in a given behavior (e.g., study for a test) when that behavior feels identity congruent (i.e., like a "me" or "us" thing to do) and when they interpret any difficulty associated with the behavior as an indication of its importance. Thus, for students from lower-class backgrounds to engage in academic behaviors, they need to not only learn behavioral strategies, but also to view their academic possible selves as relevant to their current selves, see academic behaviors as a "me" or "us" thing to do, and interpret difficulty as suggestive of the importance of those behaviors.

Building on this work on possible selves and identity-based motivation, research on cultural mismatch theory focused on one particular type of disconnect between students' selves or identities and their academic contexts: the higher-class norms of independence that pervade higher education and the relatively interdependent norms common in lower-class contexts. Cultural

mismatch theory posits that this mismatch undermines the experience of fit and academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, & Dittmann, 2019; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). 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 perform worse on academic tasks (e.g., anagrams; Dittmann et al., 2020; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). These effects of cultural mismatch do not dissipate as students navigate these institutions over time—they persist throughout four years in college (Phillips et al., 2020).

Independent norms in educational institutions also promote the idea that students should compete to showcase their skills and stand out. When academic environments prioritize independent norms of competition, students from lower-class backgrounds, who often prioritize community and collaboration, tend to feel like imposters and are more likely to 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 chosen for subsequent academic opportunities. Yet the very idea of selecting the best individual students is highly independent. Therefore, to the extent that institutions emphasize that the goal of education is to select the best students rather than help students learn, they tend to 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 (Autin et al., 2019; 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 on individuals, obscuring the role of contexts or backgrounds in shaping people's outcomes. These norms can 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 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 sufficient 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 narratives. One way 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 take the opportunity to reflect on their background-specific strengths, students are more likely to report that they will persist in the face of difficulty and perform better academically (Hernandez et al., 2021; Silverman, Hernandez, et al., 2023). Likewise, when students perceive that the university culture actively supports students from lower-class backgrounds, they are more likely to view their backgrounds as a match with 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

As described in the previous section, educational institutions can disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds by undermining their psychological experiences (e.g., reduced fit or empowerment) and, in turn, academic performance. This section focuses on social psychological interventions that address these social class differences in experiences to improve the academic performance of students from lower-class backgrounds. Broadly speaking, 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 interpretations that bolster students' engagement and persistence—such as, "I belong here and have what it takes to succeed" (Stephens, Hamedani & Townsend, 2019; Covarrubias & Laiduc, 2022).

Social-belonging interventions address 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. Social-belonging interventions reduce 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).

In contrast, *difference-education* interventions address students' challenges by explaining the importance of their different 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 in college (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 (Ramirez et al., 2021; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2019). By focusing on social group difference and representing it as a potential strength, difference-education provides an additional benefit for students from both lower- and higher-class backgrounds: increased 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 the university (Hecht et al., 2021).

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 academic selves or identities. Building on theories of possible selves and identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2015), this type of intervention recognizes the importance of cultivating students' academic selves that are connected to their academic environment (see Stephens et al., 2011). To illustrate, one intervention highlighted how students' academic selves 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 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. First, we described how educational institutions can disadvantage students from lower-class backgrounds by undermining their psychological experiences (e.g., reduced fit or empowerment) and, in turn, academic performance. Second, we explained how interventions can level the playing field by taking into account these social class differences in students' experiences.

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 to situations where a person actively engages with others or imagines engaging with others (e.g., cross-class interactions, detecting social class). For example, just as independent ideas about how to be a "good" or successful person shape institutions, so too do they influence people's everyday interactions. These independent ideas can foster interactions with others that are self-focused, devoid of compassion, and inattentive to others.

This section 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 helping others and their willingness to do so. Second, we examine how social class contexts shape people's

experience of their closest relationships (e.g., romantic, family, friends). Finally, we describe research on cross-class interactions and the detection of social class during interactions.

Thinking About Others

Social class differences in models of self influence how people think about and respond to other people (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Reflecting greater interdependence, people in lower-class contexts pay more attention to other people and are more compassionate and 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, 2020). In contrast, reflecting greater independence, people in higher-class contexts tend to be more disengaged in social interactions.

These differences in engagement 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 enable 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 trust strangers less and trust people with whom they have relationships more than people in higher-class contexts. 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., 2022). Yet 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 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). Research has examined how the social class of both the receivers and givers impacts prosocial behavior. Work focused on receivers has found that people behave more prosocially toward receivers in lower-class contexts than toward receivers 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).

The 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 either that the effect is not as robust as previously believed, or that there may be some critical moderators. 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 the study of how social class shapes close relationships is relatively new in social psychology, 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 when they do marry, more likely to divorce-–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, social psychological research 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 resources 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 of these relationships (Emery & Le, 2014). The greater risks and vulnerability associated with 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, family, and community) are also more important in lower-class contexts. People in these contexts spend more time with family and neighbors (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 envision supportive relationships as part of a good life, and as a result, they have better markers of physical health (Levine et al., 2016; Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004).

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, people tend to affiliate more strongly with those from similar social class backgrounds as themselves (Côté et al., 2017). 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 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 cultural product of a person (e.g., a speech) and ask them to infer that person's social class. Even with relatively minimal information—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. When people perceive job applicants as being in 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, including how engaged people are when interacting with others, their patterns of speaking, and their facial expressions (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017; Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2019). Some of these cues provide relatively accurate information as to people's social class; for instance, people infer lower- or higher-class based on higher or lower levels of social responsiveness, respectively (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Another cue that provides relatively accurate information is people's patterns of speech; for example, people infer lower- or higher-class based on less or more normatively correct speech patterns, respectively (Kraus et al., 2019). Yet some of these cues are not actually linked to social class. 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 on how different social class contexts shape psychology and behavior at the interaction level of culture. We described 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 individuals' patterns of thought, feeling, and action (e.g., internal attributions).

This section 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 subjective well-being (i.e., life evaluation and emotional well-being). Second, we review research on emotion, including people's experiences of emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger) and how people regulate the emotions they display (e.g., amplification, reappraisal). Finally, we examine how social class contexts shape people's cognition (e.g., attention and attributions, narcissism and entitlement, thinking, decision-making).

Health And Subjective Well-Being

A significant body of literature demonstrates that higher-class contexts are associated with a variety of positive outcomes for mental and physical health (e.g., Adler, 2013; Adler et al., 1994; Diener et al., 2010; Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Hughes et al., 2017; Kivimäki et al., 2020). Although the majority of this research has been conducted by health and clinical psychologists, rather than social psychologists, we briefly review this literature. Specifically, we first discuss research on the association between social class and individuals' subjective well-being and, subsequently, physical health. We then 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 (how a person appraises their life when thinking about it) and emotional well-being (the degree to which the emotions a person 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 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; Kushlev et al., 2015) and fewer depressive symptoms (e.g., Miech & Shanahan, 2000; Wickrama et al., 2009).

In addition, a body of research has examined the relationship between financial resources and happiness. In general, people in higher-class contexts report greater happiness, yet this overall linear relationship obscures the full picture (Diener et al., 2010; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Donnelly et al., 2018; Killingsworth, 2021; Killingsworth et al., 2023). Specifically, the size of the association between social class and happiness differs among people who are relatively happy versus unhappy (Killingsworth et al., 2023). For example, among unhappy people, increases in income are more strongly related to happiness when they have incomes below $100,000 versus above $100,000. Thus, it is possible that unhappy people whose annual income is above $100,000 may be unhappy for reasons that additional money cannot address (e.g., chronic illness, loss of loved ones).

Social class is also associated with individuals' physical health. A robust body of research finds that lower-class contexts are associated with various health outcomes, including premature mortality (e.g., Adler, 2013; Harper & Lynch, 2007; Hughes et al., 2017; Kivimäki et al., 2020; Mackenbach et al., 2008; Puterman et al., 2020). In two large-scale studies comparing 57 possible risk factors, several features of individuals' social class contexts emerged as strong predictors of mortality (e.g., recent financial difficulties, lower occupational status, lower wealth; Puterman et al., 2020). In addition, this body of work suggests a monotonic or graded association between social class contexts and indicators of physical health, such that each additional unit of education or income is associated

with improvements in physical health, and this association holds across the social class hierarchy (Miech & Shanahan, 2000; Wickrama et al., 2009). In other words, it is not that lower social class has negative effects only in conditions of poverty where people lack resources to meet their basic needs; instead, each additional unit of social class is linked with improvements in health outcomes.

Mediators And Moderators Of The Social Class Association With Health

Psychological scholars have theorized and found evidence for multiple pathways through which social class contexts impact mental and physical health, often including psychological and social resources (e.g., Adler et al., 1994; Bailis et al., 2001; Chen & Miller, 2012; Marmot et al., 1997; Matthews & Gallo, 2011). The reserve capacity model proposes that personal and social resources function as key psychological pathways that can mediate and moderate the link between social class contexts and health, protecting those in lower-class contexts from poor health outcomes (e.g., Gallo et al., 2005; Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Gallo et al., 2009; Matthews & Gallo, 2011). These resources include perceived control, self-esteem, optimism, perceived social support, social integration, and social capital. 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), high levels of perceived social support (Hooker et al., 2018), and high levels of perceived partner commitment (Tan et al., 2020) are also associated with a reduction in social class disparities.

Coping strategies that people use may also play a moderating role, reducing social class disparities in health. Specifically, strategies that reflect interdependent behaviors prevalent in lower-class contexts are associated with better health for those in lower-class—but not higher-class—contexts. In particular, "shift-and-persist" coping strategies are consistent with interdependent models of self that emphasize adjusting to the context. That is, 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). Use of shift-and-persist strategies among those in lower-class contexts is associated with improved mental and physical health outcomes (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 better 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 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 (e.g., personal goals) 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 (e.g., supportive relationships) 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 positive and negative emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness), specific categories of emotions (e.g., *internalizing* versus *externalizing* emotions), and 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; Kushlev et al., 2015) and greater happiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Killingsworth, 2021; Killingsworth et al., 2023). 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 contexts shape 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 than those in lower-class contexts (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, hostility, and 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 consistent with interdependent models of self: compassion and love (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018). In contrast, individuals from higher-class contexts were more often report positive emotions consistent with independent models of self: contentment and pride (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018).

Just as social class contexts shape the emotions people experience, they may also influence individuals' use of emotion regulation strategies and the effects of using such strategies. One emotional regulation strategy is *amplification*, in which people amplify their emotional expression in response to a stimulus (e.g., a disgust-eliciting movie). Initial work suggests that people in higher-class contexts may have greater ability to regulate their emotion using amplification, compared to those in lower-class contexts (Côté et al., 2010), maybe because higher-class contexts place greater value on individual emotional expression. A second emotional regulation strategy is *cognitive reappraisal*, in which people reframe a particular situation. Research found no social class differences in people's ability to use this emotional regulation strategy, but it is more effective among people in lower-class contexts (Troy et al., 2017; Hittner et al., 2019). This may be because it is particularly effective to cognitively reframe a situation in lower-class contexts, which offer limited material resources and thus fewer opportunities to influence or change one's situation.

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 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011) and the attributions they are likely to make when explaining behavior—that of others and their own (Kraus et al., 2009; Varnum et al., 2012; for an exception see Bowman et al., 2009). Research on attention 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, those in lower-class contexts are more likely to notice changes in the context or background of an image. Research on attribution demonstrates that individuals in lower-class contexts are more likely to make contextual attributions compared to those in higher-class contexts. Specifically, lower-class contexts are associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing contextual explanations for economic trends, broad social outcomes, and emotion (Kraus et al. 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 (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 et al., 2021; Piff, 2014; Von Soest et al., 2018). When asked to rank their performance on a task relative to other study participants, people in higher-class contexts are overconfident. This is due, in part, 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 reduce the narcissism demonstrated by individuals from higher-class contexts, leading them to show levels 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

Decision-making is another psychological process at the individual level that is shaped by social class contexts (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 showed better performance on a range of decision-making tasks (e.g., resistance to framing effects and sunk costs, less overconfidence; Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007; Larrick et al., 1993). Better performance on these tasks is associated with being less likely to report negative, decision-related life events (e.g., locking yourself out of your home, loaning more than $50 to someone and never getting it back; Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007). However, these decision-making tasks are based on values and priorities prevalent in higher-class contexts (e.g., those taught on university campuses). Importantly, research on scarcity paints a nuanced picture of how experiences in lower-class contexts impact cognition and decision-making, improving some aspects and hurting others (e.g., Binkley & Bejnarowicz, 2003; Shah et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2015). Being in very low social class contexts and experiencing scarcity can lead to an increased focus on resources, which is associated with the decision to overborrow money (e.g., Shah et al., 2012). At the same time, scarcity is also associated with increased likelihood of remembering items' costs (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013); lower susceptibility to some pricing tricks (Binkley & Bejnarowicz, 2003); and context effects (e.g., the value of an item being less influenced by its irrelevant purchase point; Shah et al., 2015).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Amidst skyrocketing social class inequality and plummeting opportunities for social mobility, social class has become an even more potent and undeniable force in shaping human psychology and behavior. This widening social class divide threatens educational opportunity, health and well-being, and the social fabric and institutions that sustain society. 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.

Cultural psychology has long questioned the notion of psychological universals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Building on this tradition, 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 basic components of a universal, human psychology. The current review shows that these individualistic patterns are context-contingent; they are made possible by the resources of higher-class contexts, which provide abundant financial resources and opportunities for 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 resources of people's social class contexts (e.g., access to financial resources, how people are socialized in families and schools). Second, 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 they as *individuals* think, feel, and act.

Theoretical Implications

The social-class-in-context perspective that we put forth in this chapter provides specific theoretical insights that help answer two of the most common questions regarding social class. First, the question "How is social class different from power or status?" distinguishes social class from these related constructs. Second, the question "What is the best way to measure social class?" provides crucial theoretical insights about measuring social class.

Social Class Differs From Power And Status

The social-class-in-context perspective suggests that social class affects psychology and behavior 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 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 with respect to (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 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 often 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) and 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*, a 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 well with others (Dittmann et al., 2020). Unlike a single, isolated experience of lower power or status (e.g., one manipulated in the laboratory), it is only the repeated and chronic experience in particular lower-class contexts that affords these particular challenges *and* strengths. For example, a single instance of lower power or status would likely 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 overall patterns that inform a wide range of social groups' experiences and outcomes. However, these general studies in isolation do not illuminate the particular effects of social class in particular and how it shapes people's distinct selves and identities, or the unique challenges and strengths that emerge from lower-class contexts.

How To Measure Social Class

The social-class-in-context perspective also provides insights about how to operationalize and measure social class. In this section, we first review how social class is typically operationalized and measured, and discuss theoretical roadblocks that can emerge with this approach. Second, we suggest that scholars adopt a theoretically informed approach to measuring social class that reflects their particular research question and theorizing about social class. Third, using the social-class-in-context perspective to illustrate how scholars can take such an approach, we suggest key insights about how to operationalize and measure social class. By conceptualizing social class as a

positioning in a social hierarchy based on having access to the material and social resources that afford power and status in a given context, researchers can use measures that best capture the resources in those contexts.

The typical approach

Researchers tend to measure social class using either objective or subjective measures. Yet the use of a particular measure is rarely justified in relation to the research question or theoretical approach (Antonoplis, 2023). Commonly used objective measures of social class include education, income, and occupational prestige (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). The two most commonly used subjective measures are: the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Adler et al., 2000) and a categorical self-report measure. The MacArthur Scale provides a visual image of a 10-rung ladder that asks people to rank themselves relative to others in society based on income, education, and occupation. The categorical self-report measure asks people to identify one category that represents their social class group (e.g., working-class, middle-class, upper-class; Bernstein, 1971; Mahalingam, 2003; Dietze & Knowles, 2016; 2021).

Among the many possible measures of social class, scholars tend to either pick one measure (e.g., education) or use a composite measure that represents one's social class by collapsing across multiple indicators of social class (e.g., income, education, and a subjective measure). When researchers choose to use a single measure, they sometimes rely on different measures across studies in a single paper or across papers on the same topic (e.g., Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; Piff et al., 2010). When researchers use a composite, they typically first standardize each indicator 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 indicators (e.g., Browman, Svoboda, et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2020; Kraus, Horberg et al., 2011; Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Finally, they compare people at one standard deviation above (i.e., higher-class) and one standard deviation below (i.e., lower-class) the mean of the sample.

Challenges with the typical approach

Using different measures across studies on the same topic or relying on composite measures create theoretical challenges (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007; Antonoplis, 2023). One set of challenges arises when scholars use different measures across studies in a single paper or across papers on the same topic. Consider the following example with studies on prosocial behavior. Using educational attainment as a measure, Study 1 shows 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. Reporting only income or education in a given study can hinder our understanding of whether the effects of social class (e.g., donating money) are specific to a given indicator of social class (e.g., education). We therefore suggest that researchers report any measures used in a study across all studies within that paper. For example, if education and income are deemed theoretically relevant to the research question about prosocial behavior, both measures should be reported across all studies on this topic—within and across papers.[5]

Another set of challenges arises when researchers use composite measures that collapse across indicators of social class. The 2007 APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status cautions against

creating composite measures, arguing, "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). Scholars in health psychology agree that 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). A review of the literature on health and psychological well-being concluded, "The consensus seems to be that multiple components should be measured, but… they should be used in analyses separately rather than combined into one scale" (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2002, p. 17).

We agree with these recommendations and propose that composite measures should be avoided because they undermine theoretical advancement in at least two key ways. First, composites require researchers to standardize each measure that is part of the composite, which obscures meaningful differences within those individual measures. For example, within a measure of education, a one-unit change from a high school degree to a four-year degree is far more societally and psychologically meaningful than a one-unit change from a four-year degree to a master's degree (Schneider & de Alva, 2018). By creating a composite measure that comprises multiple, standardized measures of social class (e.g., education and income combined together), this approach erroneously assumes that a one-unit increase in standard deviation of education is equivalent to a one-unit increase in standard deviation in income. One unit above the mean of education could be far more meaningful than one unit above the mean in income. When we put these different standardized measures together, we obscure these important differences both within and across measures.

Second, although a composite measure documents the effects of *relatively* higher- or lower-class in a particular sample, it provides little insight about the material and social resources available in that sample's social class contexts (e.g., see Trautmann et al., 2013, for discussion).[6] When considering a group labeled "higher social class," what level of educational attainment or income does that group have on average? The educational attainment or income of participants can be very different from one study to the next depending on the social class diversity of the particular sample. In one study, the terms *higher-class* and *lower-class* could refer to people with household incomes of $100,000 and $50,000, respectively. In another study, *higher-class* and *lower-class* could refer to people with $50,000 and $25,000, respectively. Thus, the term *higher-class* in one study could refer to the people who had the exact same objective income—$50,000—as those who were labeled as *lower-class* in the other study.

This inconsistency in labeling a composite measure may obscure important psychological and behavioral patterns across studies and papers. It also makes it difficult to compare results across samples and papers—a necessary step in advancing theory. For example, this inconsistency may limit understanding of how the particular material and social resources available in social class contexts (e.g., a four-year college degree) shape people's specific 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).

Theoretically informed guidelines

To overcome some of these challenges, we suggest that researchers allow their research question and theoretical approach guide which social class measures they use in a given project or paper (see

Antonoplis, 2023; 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 of social class—such as the MacArthur ladder measure and the self-report categorical 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 category measure (e.g., I identify as "working-class") implies membership in a discrete social group and an identity attached to that group. For instance, when researchers are interested in the impact of individuals' tendency to endorse an identity as "working-class," the subjective self-report 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 firmly connected to the actual material and social resources of people's social class contexts would be a better match. Again, to differentiate among objective measures—education, income, occupation—researchers should let their research question and theory guide this choice. Educational attainment teaches students higher-class 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). Education socializes students to develop their own ideas and opinions, to believe that those ideas have value, and to shape the environment by expressing those ideas to others. 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 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 differing opportunities for personal 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 resources of different workplace environments (e.g., autonomy, control, hazards on the job) shape individuals' experiences and outcomes.

To further illustrate how a 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 the divergent material and social resources available in people's social class contexts. A social-class-in-context perspective suggests the importance of identifying a measure or set of measures that most directly capture those resources. Accordingly, measuring individuals' education, income, or occupation would be a better and more direct proxy for the material and social resources of people's actual social class contexts than subjective measures (e.g., the MacArthur ladder). Subjective and categorical self-report measures would instead capture the more distal psychological experience of power and status, which are afforded by material and social resources.

Building on this insight, future research might also consider ways to capture even more closely the full set of resources available in people's environments. For example, might we consider measures of neighborhood wealth or community resources (e.g., access to a well-funded school or community center)? Combined with individual-level resources, these community-level resources might enable us to better predict the psychological or behavioral effects of social class by more fully capturing the range of resources to which an individual has access.

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, we urge them

to consider which measure is most relevant and informative given their theory and research question.

Future Directions

Toward A Dynamic And Intersectional Understanding Of Social Class

Social psychological 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. Indeed, 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 effects emerge, identifying key mediators and moderators. For instance, research on social class and prosocial behavior is one of the few research areas that has documented moderators, 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 et al., 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.

The next phase of research should also go beyond the assumptions of linearity that pervade social class research to incorporate a more nuanced set of comparisons across varied categorical positions in the social class hierarchy (e.g., poverty versus working-class). Indeed, within social psychology, social class has often been studied in a monolithic way, such that researchers compare a "high" or "higher" social class group to a "low" or "lower" social class group. These comparisons assume linear differences in psychology and behavior, such that the results document how people in higher-class contexts display more or less of a psychological tendency (e.g., independence) than people in lower-class contexts. Linearity would predict that the ultra rich would be more independent than those in the upper-class, the upper-class would be more independent than the middle-class, the middle-class would be more independent than the working-class, and the working-class would be more independent than those in poverty.

The next phase of research should interrogate this assumption of linearity. For example, some initial research suggests that people in poverty could have a unique psychological profile that is not simply lower in independence than all other positions higher in the social class hierarchy. In these studies, the financial distress and social isolation experienced by women on welfare left them with no one to rely on other than themselves (Steele & Sherman, 1999; Stephens et al., 2014). Comparing across three groups of women differentially positioned in the social class hierarchy, the women on welfare described themselves as less trusting and more independent from social others than women in working-class and middle-class contexts (Steele & Sherman, 1999; Stephens et al., 2014). Together, this initial work suggests that the linear understanding of social class that guides research is not wholly accurate.

The next phase of research should also go beyond conceptions of social class as static or fixed to consider it a dynamic, changing phenomenon. Most studies examine individuals' current position in the hierarchy, but not current, past, and future possibilities in conjunction. Some research has begun to explore interesting questions from this more dynamic perspective by considering momentary shifts in individuals' social class identity and 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 versus stability in individuals' social class contexts (Martin & Côté, 2019; Martin et al., 2016). 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 have higher-class backgrounds—feel more entitled than people currently in higher-class contexts who have lower-class backgrounds (Côté et al., 2021). Moreover, people whose social class has been consistently high are more entitled than those who have fallen 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 as of the writing of this chapter (Crenshaw, 1991), psychologists have only joined the conversation more recently. 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 and 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 other sociocultural contexts. For example, how does the intersection of social class with race and gender impact the particular models of self that people are likely to develop? Research has shown that women and Black people tend to be guided by interdependent models of self more than men and White people, respectively (Brannon et al., 2015; Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Conner, 2014). Given these differences in models of self across social class, race, and gender, are Black women in lower-class contexts especially interdependent? And, if so, how do these particular models of self shape psychology and behavior?

New Topics For The Next Wave Of Research On Social Class

Even beyond the need for a more nuanced, dynamic, and intersectional approach to studying the effects of social class, there are important domains of inquiry that have yet to be considered in social psychology. One key area that is crucial for people's well-being and life outcomes 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 is from the field of organizational behavior rather than social psychology (e.g., Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Kish-Gephart et al., 2023; Martin & Côté, 2019; Phillips, Martin, & Belmi, 2020).

Scholars in organizational behavior have considered how social class impacts important work-relevant outcomes, such as the choice about whom to hire, how much salary to pay, the job search process, which career is a good fit for one's future goals, and effectiveness as a leader (DeOrtentiis et

al., 2022; Fang & Tilcsik, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Martin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). In social psychology, recent papers have developed theorizing to consider the impact of cultural mismatch in professional workplaces (Stephens, Dittmann, & Townsend, 2017; Townsend & Truong, 2017). One of the only empirical 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). Another example documents the pernicious effects of cultural mismatch in terms of bias against job applicants from lower-class backgrounds (Sharps & Anderson, 2021). Future research across disciplines should test this theorizing more fully 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 curbing climate change, social class disparities in health, and civic engagement—are also ripe for social psychological intervention. For example, research documents that the drivers of pro-environmental action differ by sociocultural context (Eom et al., 2019). Beyond the clear key role of resource constraints, social class differences in psychology might also lead people from lower-class contexts to engage less with policies that would reduce climate change and benefit the environment. Consistent with the idea that independent models of self are more common in higher-class contexts, *personal* beliefs or attitudes about the environment predict pro-environmental action more strongly for people in higher-class (versus lower-class) contexts (Eom et al., 2018). The reduced importance of personal beliefs in lower-class contexts suggests that interventions to increase environmentalism might benefit from identifying other antecedents to behavior that are more relevant in lower-class contexts (e.g., considering the benefits of pro-environmental action for one's family).

Beyond expanding to new domains, it is also critical to leverage new understandings of social class differences—and how they operate in society—and 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 reason is because they prioritize the norms and values of people in higher-class contexts and are not tailored to the realities of life in lower-class contexts (Stephens et al., 2009). Indeed, most scholars of social psychology inhabit social class contexts that consist of people with advanced degrees, professional occupations, and above-average incomes. Yet in the United States, the vast majority (68%) of people over age 25 have less than a four-year college degree and inhabit lower-class contexts (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 and the resulting threats to the social fabric of society—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. As we

have shown in this chapter, understanding human behavior and how to change it 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 (Henrich, 2020). For social psychology to maintain its relevance, it must diversify its focus as an upper-class science to incorporate a much wider diversity of participants, human experiences, and psychological patterns. Only then will we have a more complete picture of the psychological science of human behavior.

AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

1. We use the term social class because this term suggests a greater emphasis on social groups and cultural contexts compared to the term socioeconomic status. Although social psychologists often use these terms interchangeably, we use the term social class throughout this chapter. ↑

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 control that is relatively subjective. Thus, power has both objective and subjective elements. ↑

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, being) that organize people's experience and behavior." (pp. 11-12). ↑

4. These five moral foundations have taken on other names throughout the years. For instance, Graham et al. (2013) referred to them as Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation. ↑

5. Some benefits of reporting multiple measures across studies include helping to capture a broader range of experiences associated with social class and determining which indicators of social class are most closely linked to a particular psychological experience or process. ↑

6. When scholars use composite measures, they should seek at a minimum to overcome this challenge by describing in greater detail who is being labeled as higher- or lower-class in a given sample. ↑