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Social Class as Culture: The Convergence of Resources and Rank in the Social Realm

Michael W. Kraus[1], Paul K. Piff[2], and Dacher Keltner[2]
[1]University of California, San Francisco and [2]University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

Social class reflects more than the material conditions of people's lives. Objective resources (e.g., income) shape cultural practices and behaviors that signal social class. These signals create cultural identities among upper- and lower-class individuals—identities that are rooted in subjective perceptions of social-class rank vis-à-vis others. Empirical studies find that perceptions of social-class rank influence patterns of contextual versus dispositional cognition and other- versus self-oriented affect and behavior that are consistent with objective resource-based measures of social class. Our theoretical conceptualization emphasizes the utility of measuring and manipulating perceptions of social-class rank to better understand how social class influences thought and action across diverse social domains.

Keywords

social class, culture, rank, social hierarchy, inequality

Social theorists have been interested in social class for over a century (Durkheim, 1893/1933). From the macro to the minute, social class pervades the social environment, differentiating people in the most rudimentary elements of their lives—including their neighborhoods, schools, diets, preferred forms of recreation, and places of worship (Domhoff, 1998). Daily life is suffused with social class.

In this article, we outline a theoretical account of how social class influences thought, feeling, and action (see Fig. 1). We posit that the individual's social class is a cultural identity constituted via two processes. Specifically, a person's objective social class—or objective resources—is signaled via symbols of wealth, preferences, and social behaviors (e.g., manners, language use). These class-related signals evoke inferences and perceptions of one's own subjective social-class rank vis-à-vis others. Together, objective resources and subjective social-class rank give rise to dramatically different patterns of thought, feeling, and action: contextually focused patterns of cognition and other-oriented emotion and behavior among lower-class individuals and dispositionally focused cognition and self-focused emotion and behavior among upper-class individuals. To support this theory, we turn to recent empirical evidence that shows how social class is signaled in interactions and highlight how the two core processes we describe shape three aspects of social life: social explanation, emotion perception, and prosocial behavior.

Signals of Social Class: From Objective Resources to Cultural Symbols of Rank

Wealth, education, and occupational prestige are, together, the objective substance of social class (see Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). These objective elements of social class give rise to patterned distinctions in the material lives of lower- and upper-class individuals—living in different neighborhoods, belonging to different social clubs, attending different educational institutions, eating different kinds of foods, enjoying different forms of recreation, wearing specific clothes (Domhoff, 1998). To the extent that these patterns of behavior are both observable and reliably associated with individual wealth, occupational prestige, and education, they become potential signals to others of a person's social class. Observable symbols of wealth, education, and occupation are the most direct signals of social class. So, too, recent studies have revealed, are musical preferences

Corresponding Author:
Michael W. Kraus at University of California, 3333 California Street, Suite 465, San Francisco, CA 94143 or Paul K. Piff or Dacher Keltner at University of California, Department of Psychology, 3210 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720.
E-mail: michael.kraus@ucsf.edu, ppiff@berkeley.edu, or keltner@berkeley.edu

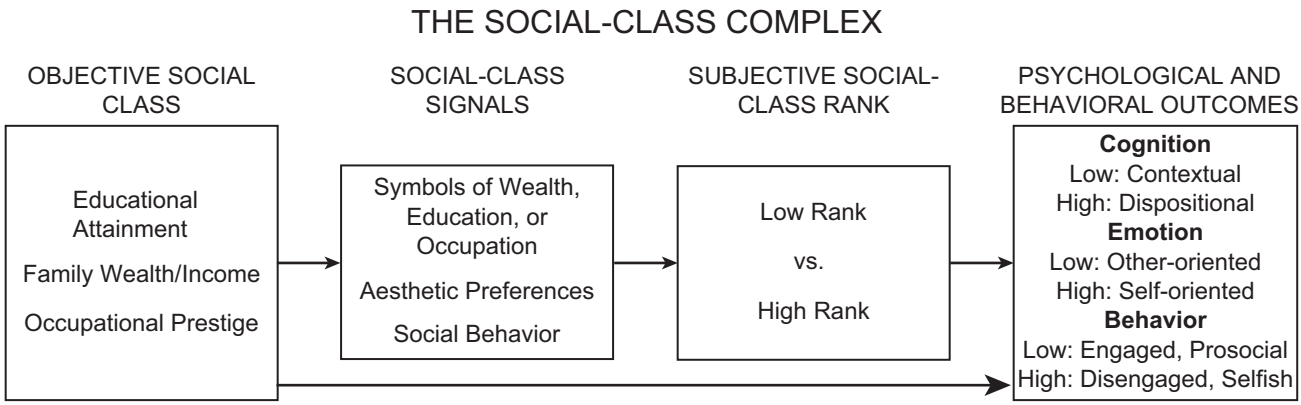

Fig. 1. Model representing the influence of objective social class, signals of social class, and subjective social-class rank on psychological and behavioral outcomes among lower- and upper-class individuals.

(Snibbe & Markus, 2005), as well as manners and customs (e.g., Domhoff, 1998).

Social class is also signaled in specific repertoires of subtle nonverbal behavior that derive from the greater resources upper-class individuals enjoy vis-à-vis their lower-class counterparts (e.g., Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Specifically, upper-class individuals live lives of abundant resources and less dependency on others and should signal this resource independence with nonverbal disengagement (e.g., less responsive head nods, less eye contact). By contrast, lower-class individuals are more dependent upon others' resources, which they should signal with nonverbal social engagement (e.g., head nods, eye contact).

To test these claims, in one study we videotaped interactions between two strangers from different social-class backgrounds getting acquainted for 5 minutes. As predicted, upper-class individuals appeared more disengaged nonverbally, for instance checking their cell phone or doodling on a questionnaire, whereas lower-class individuals displayed more socially engaged eye contact, head nods, and laughs (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Moreover, in keeping with findings from the thin-slicing literature—which illustrate that people make inferences of others' personal characteristics based on brief observations of behavior (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992)—when presented with 60-second segments of these interactions, naïve observers reliably judged the education and income backgrounds of the individuals and based these judgments on class-related disengagement and engagement behaviors. These findings illustrate the speed and accuracy of the social-class signaling process and demonstrate the extent to which such signals—beyond observable indicators of material wealth—permeate the social environment.

Many observable aspects of social life differentiate the lives of upper- and lower-class individuals and should serve as signals of social class. Exactly which signals are most diagnostic of social class and how these signals vary across cultures and sociopolitical contexts (e.g., capitalist, socialist), are important areas of inquiry (see Fig. 1). So, too, are the processes of self- and other-categorization that these class-based signals trigger. We are proposing that individuals use class-related signals to display their objective resources and to infer the objective resources of others. Through signaling, individuals provide the information necessary to compare their own wealth, education, occupation, aesthetic preferences, and behavior to those of other individuals. This social-signaling process separates people into different social-class categories and is the basis for the individual's subjective understanding of his or her social-class rank (see Markus & Kitayama, 2010, for a review of how the self is constituted in similar kinds of social comparisons).

Experiencing Hierarchy: Subjective Social-Class Rank

Humans array themselves into hierarchies on numerous dimensions, including physical stature, respect in one's important social groups, and the capacity for power (e.g., Guinote & Vescio, 2010). Hierarchies are inherently vertical and relational: They determine the individual's privileged access to resources and influence (e.g., Keltner, van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008). We posit that an individual's sense of social class—his or her subjective social-class rank—is in part constructed through the social-class signaling processes we have just described.

Researchers have traditionally assessed subjective social-class rank using a measure of subjective socioeconomic status, wherein participants rank themselves relative to others in terms of education, income, and occupation status on a 10-rung ladder representing society (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008). Critically, subjective social-class rank is statistically related to objective resources but contributes to the health and well-being of individuals independently of their objective resources. Studies find that, relative to objective resource-based measures of social class (e.g., education, income), subjective social-class rank more strongly predicts self-rated health and physiological health outcomes including

body-fat distribution and resting heart rate (e.g., Adler et al., 2000). These results underscore the importance of perceptions of social-class rank—and of the broader signaling processes we have described—in the experience of social class and its associated outcomes.

As shown in Figure 1, we argue that subjective social-class rank exerts broad influences on social thought, emotion, and behavior independently of the substance of objective social class. We posit that these effects are parallel to, but distinguishable from, those of other forms of rank, such as power (e.g., Guinote & Vescio, 2010). Perceptions of one's own lower-class rank trigger heightened vigilance of the social context and an other-focused social orientation, which are well-documented and adaptive strategies of lower-rank individuals navigating more unstable and challenging environments (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). In contrast, upper-class rank perceptions trigger a focus away from the context toward the self, prioritizing self-interest. In these ways, subjective social-class rank influences social behavior.

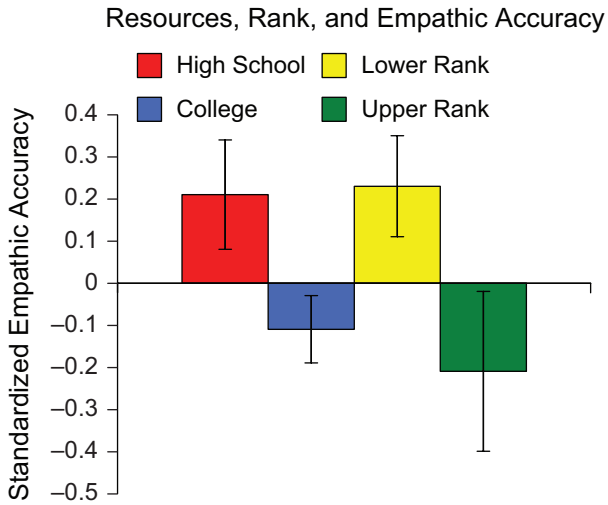

Fig. 2. The effects of educational attainment (Study 1) and manipulated social-class rank (Study 3) on standardized empathic accuracy scores (data reprinted from Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010).

Attending to the Context: Social Class and Social Explanation

In a first line of research, we explored how subjective social-class rank shapes social-cognitive tendencies. Due to their lower rank, lower-class individuals' life outcomes are often influenced by forces outside their control (e.g., job supervisors, government policies). Given this pattern, we reasoned that how lower-class individuals understand the social environment would reflect a contextual orientation—greater sensitivity to the social context and interdependence with the individuals within it—relative to upper-class individuals, whose lives are more under individual control and influence. Supporting this hypothesis, survey research has found that lower-income individuals attribute poverty and wealth to contextual forces (e.g., educational opportunity), whereas upper-income individuals explain inequality in terms of dispositions (e.g., talent; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

We tested whether subjective social-class rank similarly shifts patterns of explanation (Kraus et al., 2009). We found that individuals reporting lower subjective socioeconomic status experienced reduced personal control and, as a result, explained various personal, political, and social outcomes in contextual rather than dispositional terms. Critically, these effects held when controlling for objective social class, indicating that subjective social-class rank uniquely influences individuals' causal explanations of the events in their lives.

Class-related differences in social explanation should extend to other domains of social cognition—for instance, punitive judgments and essentialist theories about human behavior. Our own work extends this research by documenting how objective social class and subjective social-class rank shape people's orientations toward others—specifically their emotions and prosocial behavior.

Perceiving Others' Emotions: Social Class and Empathic Accuracy

As Figure 1 illustrates, we propose that social class shapes individuals' perceptions of others' emotions. Given that lower-class individuals are more engaged with others (Kraus & Keltner, 2009), and guided by research suggesting that lower-ranking individuals are more reliant on others' emotions (e.g., Guinote & Vescio, 2010), we tested whether lower-class individuals would be more accurate than upper-class individuals at perceiving the emotions that others experience. Indirect evidence supports this prediction. For instance, interdependent individuals and agreeable individuals more accurately read others' emotions relative to their more independent or less agreeable counterparts (Graziano, Habashi, Sheesh, & Tobin, 2007).

We tested the effects of social class on empathic accuracy and found a parallel pattern of results (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010). In one study, high-school-educated participants demonstrated greater empathic accuracy—by more accurately decoding emotions displayed in static facial expressions—relative to college-educated participants (see Fig. 2). We also manipulated social-class rank to test if rank perceptions cause empathic accuracy. Participants were instructed to think of interacting with a person either at the very top or bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy—a person with the most (or least) education, income, and occupation status. We reasoned that thinking about interacting with a high- or low-ranking individual would temporarily prime subjective perceptions of low or high social-class rank. Indeed, participants imagining a high-ranking person reported lower subjective social-class rank and, in turn, were more accurate than higher-ranking individuals at identifying different emotions (e.g., hostile,

playful) expressed through distinctive muscle configurations surrounding the eyes (see Fig. 2).

That an objective resource measure (educational attainment) *and* a subjective rank-based manipulation of social class similarly predicted empathic accuracy suggests that objective social class and subjective social-class rank uniquely influence class-based psychological experiences. Furthermore, as social-class measures are often intertwined with other variables (e.g., neighborhood or ethnicity), the manipulation of subjective social-class rank provides the first evidence that the construct can cause empathic accuracy. More broadly, these results highlight the importance of the social context in shifting the experience of subjective social-class rank and class-based patterns of emotion perception. Extending this work, we would expect perceptions of social-class rank to influence accuracy in judgments of others' attitudes and personality traits—domains relevant to empathic accuracy.

Have Less, Give More: Social Class and Prosocial Behavior

The research we have reviewed indicates that reduced resources and subjective social-class rank among lower-class individuals give rise to increased sensitivity to the social context, greater interpersonal engagement, and enhanced empathic accuracy. These findings suggest that lower-class individuals may be more prosocial than their upper-class counterparts. Preliminary evidence supports this prediction: For instance, a large survey found that lower-income individuals donated a higher proportion of their salary to charity than did upper-income individuals (Independent Sector, 2002).

Our recent investigation of social class and prosocial behavior specifically tested whether individuals with less—lower-class individuals—would give more (Piff et al., 2010). In one study, we asked individuals to divide 10 points (which would later be exchanged for money) between themselves and an anonymous partner. We found that individuals reporting lower subjective socioeconomic status gave more to their partner than did upper-socioeconomic-status participants. In another study, we found parallel effects with objective social class: Lower-income participants helped a distressed confederate more than did their upper-income peers.

A third study manipulated subjective social-class rank (as described earlier) before participants indicated how much of people's annual salaries should go to charity. Inducing lower-class rank caused participants to support more charitable donations than did inducing higher-class rank. We simultaneously found an independent effect of objective social class on charity: Lower-income individuals were also more charitable than upper-income individuals (see Fig. 3). These findings highlight independent objective and subjective class-based pathways to prosocial behavior and point to other lines of inquiry—including forgiveness and sacrifice—that may yield converging results.

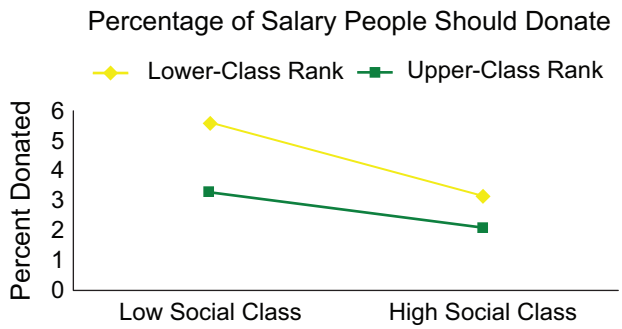

Fig. 3. The independent relationships between social class and manipulated social-class rank in predicting the percentage of people's annual salary participants believed should be spent on charitable donations (reprinted from Study 2 of Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010).

Social Class: A New Frontier of Cultural Psychology

Social class shapes the material and social substance of people's everyday lives and is reflected in an array of social signals (e.g., symbols of wealth, education, occupation, preferences, and social behavior) that, we posit, shape the individual's subjective social-class rank vis-à-vis others. This sense of subjective social-class rank is central to the social class cultural identity, giving rise, alongside objective social class, to distinct patterns of contextual versus dispositional cognition and other- versus self-oriented behavior.

There is great utility to measuring objective social class alongside subjective assessments of the construct. Conceptualizing social class as, in part, a rank-based construct has elucidated how social class shapes health, social explanation, empathic accuracy, and prosocial behavior. These results underscore the importance of social-class signaling processes both for the formation of class identity and for understanding class-based differences in everyday psychological experiences. Future research should explore how specific signals of social class both lead to accurate inferences of others' social class and contribute to one's own subjective social-class rank.

Our rank-based conception of social class also sets the stage for future experimental research. Manipulations of subjective social-class rank could help to establish stronger causal links between social class and psychological health (Adler et al., 2000). Further, although our research has shown consistent effects across various measures of childhood and adult social class, future research should test how social class changes over time and the unique influences of current and past social class on behavior (e.g., Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur, 2011).

Future research should examine how subjective social-class rank affects other domains of social life. For example, people from lower-class backgrounds may fare worse in contexts, like academic settings, predominantly composed of upper-class individuals (e.g., Johnson, Richeson, & Finkle, 2011). Independent of objective resources, chronic perceptions of lower rank

may undermine the achievement of lower-class individuals—for instance, by increasing attributions of academic success to uncontrollable contextual forces (e.g., school resources) and not more controllable internal factors (e.g., persistence; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Conclusion

A rank-based approach to social class has important implications for the study of the social realm. Rank-related processes are implicated in such diverse areas as stereotyping, goal pursuit, and self-expression (e.g., Guinote & Vescio, 2010), and the impact of social class on these domains is a fertile ground for future research. Understanding the social-class complex—comprised of objective resources and subjective social-class rank—has far-reaching implications for understanding how inequality and hierarchy mold thought and action.

Recommended Reading

Kraus, M.W., & Keltner, D. (2009). (See References). Provides the first evidence suggesting that social class is signaled and perceived during brief social encounters.

Kraus, M.W., Piff, P.K., & Keltner, D. (2009). (See References). Outlines how social class influences social explanation and demonstrates the unique effects of subjective social-class rank on dispositional versus contextual orientations among upper- and lower-class individuals.

Piff, P.K., Kraus, M.W., Côté, S., Cheng, B.H., & Keltner, D. (2010). (See References). Provides one of the first manipulations of subjective social-class rank and outlines our rationale for how social class shapes prosocial tendencies.

Snibbe, A.C., & Markus, H.R. (2005). (See References). Among the first articles to examine how social class is constituted through culture-specific aesthetic preferences.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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The first two authors contributed equally to the development of this project and the ideas within it.

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