

## Rank Is Not Enough: Why We Need a Sociocultural Perspective to Understand Social Class

Nicole M. Stephens and Sarah S. M. Townsend

*Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

In the target article, Kraus, Tan, and Tannenbaum identify a key feature of the psychological experience of social class—perception of one’s rank vis-à-vis others. This *rank-based* perspective, which reveals the systematic influence of rank on psychological functioning, makes an important contribution to current and future theories of social class. Drawing out the significance of rank brings social class research into the mainstream and puts it into ongoing conversation with social psychological literature on power, status, and intergroup relations (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination). In addition, the rank-based perspective enables Kraus and colleagues to synthesize what would otherwise be a disparate set of findings and also suggests potential paradigms for future research.

Although rank is a critical piece of the social class puzzle, the experience of social class extends far beyond rank and involves ongoing participation in a particular *sociocultural context*—a socially and historically constructed environment that contains a set of culture-specific ideas, practices, and institutions. Thus, we argue that to develop a complete understanding of the causes and consequences of social class, it is necessary to conceptualize social class contexts as sociocultural contexts—that is, to take a *sociocultural* perspective. This theoretical perspective makes two key claims. First, social class contexts (e.g., poverty, working-class, middle-class, or upper-class) are sociocultural contexts that expose people to particular material and social conditions over time. In addition to differences in rank or perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others, these contexts include different absolute levels of material resources (e.g., financial assets), as well as divergent sets of ideas (e.g., stereotypes, cultural narratives, social representations), practices (e.g., socialization styles), and institutions (e.g., workplaces, schools). The second claim of the sociocultural perspective is that people’s social class contexts are important because they shape the self and corresponding patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. For example, these sociocultural contexts shape how people answer fundamental questions such as “Who am I?” and “How should someone like me act?” People from different social class contexts will answer these questions in different ways.

By conceptualizing social class as a context that affords particular understandings of self and behavior, our sociocultural perspective provides a more thorough, experience-near, and psychologically nuanced understanding of what social class means and how it functions in a given society (e.g., in the United States). Specifically, it begins to provide more complete answers to a number of increasingly urgent questions: (a) How does social class differ from other rank-related social categories (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender), (b) How is social class produced and maintained over time, (c) How does social class shape important life outcomes, and (d) How can practitioners develop interventions that will help to reduce social class disparities in important life outcomes (e.g., in the domains of health and education)? In the sections that follow, we outline why taking a sociocultural perspective is necessary in order to answer each of these questions.

### How Rank-Related Social Categories Differ

Rank-based and sociocultural perspectives both provide general insights about what different social groups share in common. They tell us that social groups who hold a relatively low rank in society (e.g., working-class Americans, women, and racial/ethnic minorities) are likely to have some commonalities in their lived experiences, how they understand themselves, and how they behave (Markus & Conner, 2013). Despite these commonalities, however, social groups that have comparable ranks in society do not have equivalent lived experiences. For example, even though working class, women, and racial/ethnic minorities are all lower rank than their counterparts (e.g., middle-class, men, and Whites), members of these groups participate in different sociocultural contexts, which foster culture-specific understandings of the self and norms for behavior. Relying solely on a rank-based perspective conceals these potentially important psychological and behavioral differences between social class and other social categories.

A sociocultural perspective, in contrast, illuminates how social class is different from social categories such as gender or race/ethnicity. First, this perspective takes a broader view of the context and specifies the nature

and content of people's chronic experiences. By going beyond rank to consider a wide range of experiential factors, including, for example, people's absolute level of material resources (e.g., financial assets), experiences of socialization (e.g., in families or schools), and exposure to prevalent ideologies (e.g., the Protestant Ethic), a sociocultural perspective makes it possible to observe the systematic differences in the experiences of particular social groups. Second, a sociocultural perspective examines how particular chronic experiences in a given social class, gender, or race/ethnicity context foster culture-specific understandings of the self and norms for behavior.

Consider how a sociocultural perspective differentiates social class from gender. As sociocultural contexts, social class contexts not only afford a particular rank but also provide access to particular types of material resources, cultural capital, geographic mobility, and social connections with one's family and local community. Experiences in contexts with these conditions shape what people are able to do, as well as how they understand themselves and their behavior. For example, in response to limited material resources and high levels of constraint, people in working-class contexts often need to rely on others for material assistance and support, adjust themselves to situations, show sensitivity to their place in the hierarchy, and protect themselves against environmental threats. Over time, as people interact with their contexts in this way, these experiences afford a relatively interdependent way of being a person—a self that is not only socially responsive but also tough, strong, and resilient (Kusserow, 2004; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2013; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

In the case of gender, although women and men differ in their relative rank, they also experience different societal roles (e.g., caretaking) and socialization practices (e.g., in families). Specifically, from a young age, women inhabit sociocultural contexts that continually seek to cultivate their relational skills. For example, when parents talk with girls compared to boys, they spend more time discussing emotions and emphasizing the importance of being sensitive to others' feelings. Moreover, parents and teachers often assign girls caretaking tasks that signal the importance of prioritizing others' needs (Cross & Madson, 1997). Over time, girls and women are shaped by these different societal roles, expectations, and activities. As a result, their contexts afford a sense of self that is relatively connected and relational in its orientation. Compared to the style of interdependence common in working-class contexts, the style of interdependence common among women is less centered around strength and toughness and more focused on cultivating relationships (e.g., being a mother and caretaker) and accommodating others' needs.

### How Social Class Is Produced and Maintained

Conceptualizing social class as a sociocultural context also allows us to understand how social class is produced and maintained over time. Specifically, a sociocultural perspective is necessary to illuminate the ways in which social class is built into the world, including how it is reinforced and reproduced through ideas, practices, interactions, and institutions (see Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). A rank-based perspective on social class assumes that higher rank in the social class hierarchy necessarily confers greater value or status in society, and therefore does not examine how this process occurs. By contrast, a sociocultural perspective assumes that society actively produces the culture-specific value or status that becomes attached to different social classes. In other words, as Bourdieu (1979/1984) claimed, higher social class gets translated into what society defines as more valuable. For example, what it means to have "good taste" or to be "smart" or "cultured" is defined in a culture-specific way that becomes linked to the ideas, practices, and perspectives of the middle- and upper-class of society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1992). This sociocultural perspective thereby provides insight into both *how* and *what* value society assigns to different social classes.

Consider how the institution of education defines merit in the United States. Higher education often expects college students to pave their own path, express themselves, and make independent choices. These cultural norms are widely taken for granted as the only "right" way to be a student. Yet, they are not neutral. Instead, they reflect the perspectives of students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, which serves to accord greater status or value to those perspectives (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). By defining middle-class cultural norms as "merit," universities create an institutional space that values middle-class ways of being and that signals to working-class students that they do not belong or are unlikely to be successful there. As a result, the institution of education can serve to maintain and reproduce the existing social class hierarchy. As this example illustrates, to fully understand how social class is produced and maintained in society, it is important to examine the process through which society assigns value to different social classes (e.g., cultural norms in institutions).

### How Social Class Shapes Important Life Outcomes

Conceptualizing social class as a sociocultural context also broadens current understandings of how social class shapes important life outcomes, such as educational attainment and health. A rank-based perspective

on social class predicts that lower social class is associated with worse health and educational outcomes because of the negative life experiences attached to reduced rank vis-à-vis others. In the case of health, for example, lower perceived rank would produce worse health because it is linked with fewer opportunities to control or influence one's environment and more frequent exposure to environmental stressors (e.g., financial hardship, adverse work conditions). In contrast, a sociocultural perspective predicts that the negative life experiences attached to reduced rank need not lead to worse outcomes in health or education. Instead, the consequences of negative life events depend on how people interpret and respond to these events. These interpretations and responses are importantly shaped by people's experiences in particular social class contexts, which afford particular understandings of self and behavior.

Suggesting that social class contexts shape the effectiveness of a given coping style, Townsend, Eliezer, Major, and Mendes (2013) found that students who have previously participated in working- and middle-class contexts differ in their ability to cope with controllable versus uncontrollable stressors. Middle-class students, who are often guided by cultural norms to influence the situation (e.g., Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009), responded more effectively to stressors that were compatible with their cultural norms. That is, they showed more adaptive hormonal responses to controllable life stressors (i.e., personal rejection) than uncontrollable life stressors (i.e., discrimination). In contrast, working-class Americans, who are often guided by cultural norms to adjust to the situation, coped equally well with both types of stressors (Townsend et al., 2013).

Further revealing the importance of coping styles in shaping the consequences of stress, research indicates that lower social class rank is not universally associated with worse health outcomes. In fact, Chen and Miller (2012) argued that some people from lower rank social class backgrounds sidestep some of the negative health outcomes typically linked with lower social class rank because they adopt so-called shift and persist strategies for coping with adversity (i.e., adjusting oneself to the environment and enduring hardships with strength and optimism). For example, among adults from lower rank socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, the use of shift and persist strategies is associated with lower allostatic-load. Likewise, among lower rank SES children, greater use of shift and persist strategies was linked with inflammatory and asthma-related impairment similar to higher rank SES children (Chen & Miller, 2012).

To explain these different outcomes, our sociocultural perspective would examine how people's socioculturally shaped selves guide their interpretation of adversity and how these interpretations, as well as

culture-specific behavioral norms, shape how people respond. These examples underscore the need to attend to how people understand themselves and the resulting cultural norms that guide their behavior across situations (e.g., shift and persist). Doing so will make it possible to better understand what it means to have a particular social class background and how that background is likely to impact the behaviors (e.g., coping styles) that shape peoples' life outcomes.

### **How to Reduce Disparities in Health and Education**

The sociocultural perspective on social class also makes it possible to develop more effective interventions to reduce social class disparities. A rank-based perspective assumes that social class disparities stem primarily from the negative individual experiences (e.g., lower control) attached to reduced rank. An intervention guided by this perspective would therefore seek to reduce the salience of differences in rank (e.g., asking students to wear uniforms) and thus the negative experiences resulting from those differences. In contrast, a sociocultural perspective suggests that such efforts are insufficient to reduce social class disparities for two key reasons. First, social class is signaled and affects individuals' educational and health outcomes through a broad range of individual and institutional factors that go beyond rank, such as having access to rigorous coursework (e.g., AP classes) or having the cultural capital needed to fully leverage available resources (e.g., knowing how to seek help from professors). Second, a sociocultural perspective recognizes that people's socioculturally shaped selves guide how they interpret, experience, and respond to a given situation (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Thus, people who bring different selves to the situation will experience the "same" situation as a different reality.

In the domain of health, for example, reducing rank-related differences by simply educating people about the advantages of eating healthy food or making healthy food more accessible may not translate into more healthy eating habits because working-class Americans also have different selves (e.g., understandings of who they are) and understandings of normatively appropriate behavior (e.g., assumptions about what someone like them should do). That is, they may not take advantage of greater knowledge about what to eat or better access to healthy food if they do not also see healthy food as self-congruent—that is, something for "someone like them." Armed with this broader understanding of how socioculturally shaped selves shape health behavior, an intervention guided by a sociocultural perspective would seek to change behavior (e.g., improve eating habits) in a way that

acknowledges and leverages people's different understandings of themselves and of what "someone like them" should do. For example, healthy food could be linked with cultural norms common among working-class Americans (e.g., eat healthy food to help your family or community; see Stephens, Markus, et al., 2012, for review).

In the domain of education, a sociocultural perspective would take seriously the fact that students from different social class backgrounds bring different socioculturally shaped selves to educational settings, and thus experience these settings quite differently. For example, a sociocultural perspective would attend to the ways in which students' backgrounds confer culture-specific strengths, challenges, and strategies for success in college. Equipped with this broader understanding of how social class matters, this perspective suggests that interventions should not ignore these different experiences (i.e., by being class-blind) or deny the importance of people's different realities or subjective experiences of academic settings. Consistent with this claim, our own intervention successfully reduced the social class achievement gap by educating incoming first-generation college students (i.e., students who do not have parents with four-year college degrees) about the role that their social class backgrounds play in shaping the college experience (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2013). This finding suggests that recognizing how social class matters is a powerful strategy for improving students' comfort in college and equipping them with the particular strategies that "students like them" need to more effectively navigate the college experience.

### Conclusions

Why does social class predict whether people lead happy, healthy, and productive lives or experience lives characterized by poor mental health and chronic diseases? Why has the impact of social class on students' educational outcomes increased, rather than decreased, in the last 50 years? At a time of unprecedented inequality in American society, these questions are increasingly urgent and psychological science provides the tools to answer them. A rank-based perspective on social class sheds some light on these questions and opens a dialogue between social class research and other literatures in social psychology (e.g., power, status, intergroup relations). Perceiving that you are lower in rank vis-à-vis others is undoubtedly a key feature of social class. However, rank is just one piece of the social class puzzle.

To fully understand social class and begin to address the most pressing societal questions about the causes, consequences, and solutions to inequality, it is necessary to take a broader sociocultural perspective.

According to this perspective, social class contexts are conceptualized as sociocultural contexts that expose people to particular material and social conditions over time and that shape the self and corresponding patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. Conceptualizing social class in this way makes visible important differences between social categories that might otherwise remain unseen from a rank-based perspective. It also provides novel insights into how social class is produced and maintained, how it shapes important life outcomes, and how we can develop interventions to help reduce social class disparities and ultimately pave the way toward a more healthy, well-educated, and productive citizenry.

### Note

Address correspondence to Nicole M. Stephens, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208. E-mail: n-stephens@kellogg.northwestern.edu

### References

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1992). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). London, UK: Sage. (Original work published 1977)
- Chen E., & Miller, G. E. (2012). "Shift-and-Persist" strategies: Why being low socioeconomic status isn't always bad for health. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7, 135–158.
- Cross, S. E., & Madson, L. (1997). Models of the self: Self-construals and gender. *Psychological Bulletin*, 122, 5–37.
- Kusserow, A. (2004). *American individualisms: Child rearing and social class in three neighborhoods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Markus, H. R., & Connor, E. (2013). *Clash! 8 cultural conflicts that make us who we are*. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.
- Oyserman, D., & Destin, M. (2010). Identity-based motivation: Implications for intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38, 1001–1043.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., & Markus, H. R. (2011). When choice does not equal freedom: A sociocultural analysis of agency in working-class American contexts. *Social and Personality Psychology Science*, 2, 33–41.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., & Markus, H. R. (2012). It's your choice: How the middle-class model of independence disadvantages working-class Americans. In S. T. Fiske & H. R. Markus (Eds.), *Facing social class: How societal rank influences interaction* (pp. 87–106). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102, 1178–1197.
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2013). *Navigating the social class divide: A diversity education intervention improves the academic performance of first-generation college students and the college transition for all students*. Manuscript under review.

## COMMENTARIES

- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., Markus, H. R., Bergsieker, H. B., & Eloul, L. (2009). Why did they “choose” to stay? Perspectives of Hurricane Katrina observers and survivors. *Psychological Science, 20*, 878–886.
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Fryberg, S. A. (2012). Social class disparities in health and education: Reducing inequality by applying a sociocultural self model of behavior. *Psychological Review, 119*, 723–744.
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Phillips, T. (2013). *The social class culture cycle: How situational and enduring inequality shape the self and behavior*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Townsend, S. S. (2007). Choice as an act of meaning: The case of social class. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 814–830.
- Stephens, N. M., Townsend, S. S. M., Markus, H. R., & Phillips, T. (2012). A cultural mismatch: Independent cultural norms produce greater increases in cortisol and more negative emotions among first-generation college students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*, 1389–1393.
- Townsend, S. S. M., Eliezer, D., Major, B., & Mendes, W. B. (in press). Influencing the world versus adjusting to constraints: Social class moderates responses to discrimination. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.