How Social-Class Stereotypes Maintain Inequality

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Abstract

Social class stereotypes support inequality through various routes: ambivalent content, early appearance in children, achievement consequences, institutionalization in education, appearance in cross-class social encounters, and prevalence in the most unequal societies. Class-stereotype content is ambivalent, describing lower-SES people both negatively (less competent, less human, more objectified), and sometimes positively, perhaps warmer than upper-SES people. Children acquire the wealth aspects of class stereotypes early, which become more nuanced with development. In school, class stereotypes advantage higher-SES students, and educational contexts institutionalize social-class distinctions. Beyond school, well-intentioned face-to-face encounters ironically draw on stereotypes to reinforce the alleged competence of higher-status people and sometimes the alleged warmth of lower-status people. Countries with more inequality show more of these ambivalent stereotypes of both lower- and higher-SES people. At a variety of levels and life stages, social-class stereotypes reinforce inequality, but constructive contact can undermine them; future efforts need to address high-status privilege and to query more heterogeneous samples.

Social class (SC) is a stratification system that ranks people by their differential access to material, social, and cultural resources, which shapes their lives in important ways [1]. As Lott noted, "social class 'matters' and, as a social construction, can be described in terms of what persons *do*" [2:650]: their jobs, habits, hobbies, lifestyles, but also in terms of what other people expect from them, their personality traits, life choices, aspirations, motivations. These oversimplified characterizations (i.e., stereotypes) entail descriptions and prescriptions that impact individuals' achievements, self-evaluations, and well-being, as this review illustrates.

Given the "ambiguity regarding how best to conceptualize and measure social class" in psychological research [3:77], in describing social-class stereotypes, we mostly use the

labels and terms that the researchers and their respondents used, even if objectionable, in order to specify operational definitions. The meanings of terms such as *poor, working class, low income/SES*, and *rich, wealthy, high income/SES* all reflect different definition and measurement. However, we use the original labels to specify which terms participants encounter in the research reviewed. Two limitations: Our review does not address the accuracy or origins of SC stereotypes; our purview also mostly limits us to publications from 2012 onward.

Within these constraints, the review describes the often-ambivalent content of social-class stereotypes, when children acquire them, their academic consequences, their institutionalization in education, and their role in other cross-class encounters. Finally, cross-national data link stereotype ambivalence to inequality. Throughout, stereotypes reinforce inequality, but in distinct ways, beyond a merely good-bad axis. Addressing inequality requires systematic attention to the content of class stereotypes to reduce their prevalence.

Social-Class Stereotype Content

People consistently attribute well-being, health, and intelligence to people with high socioeconomic status (SES), regardless of their own SES [4]. Rich people, as a salient societal group, are cross-nationally (37 samples in 27 nations) stereotyped as more competent (but colder) than poor people, especially under conditions of greater income inequality [5]. In contrast, poor people are stereotyped as lazy and substance abusers in the US [6] as well as in the egalitarian Sweden [7]. Cross-nationally, poor people are perceived as incompetent (even more so in unequal societies) [5, but see also 7], and judged as animal-like in the UK, US, and Australia [8*]. Low-status (e.g., blue-collar or working-class) workers share a similar stereotype: They are cross-nationally perceived as incompetent (but sometimes warm, depending on the country; see [9]), and they are dehumanized (either as animals or interchangeable objects) [10].

The picture becomes even bleaker upon considering racial biases that often overlap class-based stereotypes. In particular, both Black and White respondents implicitly and explicitly associate Black targets with low-SES jobs and White targets with high-SES jobs [11]. Further, when people think about welfare recipients, one of the most despised and negatively stereotyped low-SES group in the US [12], "they spontaneously think about 'undeserving' (e.g., lazy, incompetent) African American recipients" [13**: 93]. Such mental images likely influence Americans' distaste for welfare policies (despite growing inequality).

Social Class Stereotypes in Children and Adolescents

SC is a complex social category that children may acquire later than categories of gender, race, and ethnicity. However, preschoolers, when specifically asked, can classify individuals as rich and poor, and by the age of six they perceive a rich man as more competent (e.g., hardworking, smart) than a poor man [14]. Children very early (4–6 years-old) develop a preference for wealthy groups [15,16] and use wealth cues to form their preferences toward peers, inferring their competence and popularity, with White children linking race to social class as adults do [16]. By the beginning of middle school, children become aware of their

own subjective social status, primarily informed by purchasing power (wealth), and they hold more negative stereotypes of poor than middle-class and rich people [16].

Young people's explanations concerning the causes of wealth and poverty become more articulated with age [14]. Adolescents have more knowledge of wealth than poverty (as the wealthy are the models to imitate). However, older adolescents show more complex lay theories of both wealth and poverty; although they give credit to the hard work of the wealthy, they are more prone to consider societal/structural factors to explain poverty [18*]. Being low-SES does not seem to lessen children's tendency to like wealthy people (or to dislike poor ones; [16,17]) and to mention individual factors as an explanation of wealth and poverty [18] (for a review of the psychological consequences for children experiencing economic disadvantage see [19*]).

Social-Class Stereotypes' Academic Consequences

SC stereotyping research addresses the domain where young people spend most of their waking hours, namely the consequences of class-based stereotypes for students and their academic performance, as well as stereotypical expectations that people in general, and teachers in particular, hold about pupils with different economic backgrounds.

As noted, rich people are stereotyped as intelligent and, psychometrically speaking, wealthier people do tend to have higher IQ and SAT scores compared to low-income people [20]. Despite various explanations for such a class gap in testing, scholars have only just started to investigate this phenomenon within the stereotype-threat framework (albeit even so, rarely): namely, a situational predicament affects intellectual performances of individuals who belong to negatively stereotyped groups in the intellectual domain; their performance potentially reflects on their SC group as well as themselves. Making SES salient (e.g., reporting parental income and occupation before taking a test) or presenting a standardized test as diagnostic of the negatively stereotyped domain (e.g., as a valid measure to investigate why lower income people underachieve in college) both worsen the low-SES students' verbal and math performance [21,22], with negative consequences for their self-confidence, identification with academic domains, and levels of anxiety. Stereotype threat seems to affect lower-SES children's performance from the beginning of elementary school. Making salient that a test verifies "strengths and weaknesses" in academic domains leads lower-SES children to perform poorly compared to their higher-SES counterparts [23], further indicating that children very early share the stereotype concerning differences in abilities as a function of individual's SES. Situational factors, thus, account for at least part of class differences in academic performance.

Finally, stereotype threat even affects immune health outcomes. When a test is presented as "diagnostic of intellectual ability," current low-SES predicts poor performance in a verbal task, but having experienced low-SES early in life predicts an increase of inflammatory responses (i.e., increased cytokine Interleukin-6), as a result of the stress related to stereotype threat. In other words, stereotype threat could increase the risk of negative health outcomes [24**].

Besides situational threats, societal stereotypes can be internalized. Indeed, low-income people hold lower self-esteem [25; although not all minority groups, see 26, 27], and working-class undergraduates present lower self-evaluations of their own IQ, fluid and crystalized intelligence, and creativity (the latter to a lesser extent) than their middle-class counterparts, more so if they also belong to a minority group [28]. However, compensating for stereotypic lack of competence, lower-ranked people may instead value their own warmth (trustworthiness, friendliness) [29], as others do [5]. A chronic self-concept of lower competence has a major impact on individuals' academic aspirations and achievements, especially on those who believe their personal characteristics are fixed (i.e., holding entity beliefs) and are sensitive to class-based rejection [30].

In US discourse about the SC achievement gap, two common stereotypes emerge: Low-income parents stereotypically do not value education (because of their alleged lack of involvement in their children's school activities), and "many educators, from teachers to school psychologists, believe that poor students are linguistically deficient" [6:311]. Consistently, teachers appear to be biased by attributing more academic failure to low-SES students, more frequently reporting them to special education, treating high- versus low-SES families differently. Teachers' information processing and judgment processes showed SC stereotype activation but not always their application in teachers' judgment [31; also see 32]. Notably, however, "the disadvantages of students from low SES families found in previous studies … do not necessarily rely on the fact that students from low SES show low achievement …but rather seem to stem from stereotypical knowledge that high SES students have above average achievement" [31:601].

Institutionalizing Social Classes in Education

Social scientists agree that education institutionalizes and reproduces SC inequality. The culture of the dominant group shapes educational institutions (for instance, the middle-class model of competence; [33]). And academic performance is treated as just the outcome of individuals' abilities (or lack of abilities) rather than (also) as the result of differential access to pivotal resources [20]. Therefore, middle- and upper-class students are more equipped to face academic challenges and are more familiar with academic expectations. Such familiarity represents cultural capital, and its lack creates inequitable comparisons in educational contexts [34**]. In one experimental study, even the way different performances are normally showcased in classrooms (i.e., raising a hand when students think they have the correct answer) is sufficient to disrupt fifth- and sixth-grade working-class students' achievement. In a second study, manipulating the students' familiarity with a new learning task (as a proxy of social class), those who lack familiarity performed worse when differences in performances were showcased (vs. not showcased). However, making students aware of their hidden disadvantage (i.e., some students have more familiarity with the task than you) drastically attenuated the effects of the lack of familiarity (Study 3; [34**]).

In the Swedish upper-secondary school system, 15–16 year-old students decide between academic and vocational programs, the former being chosen mostly by upper- and middle-class students, the latter by working-class students [35]. When students enrolled in academic programs described both a typical academic and vocational student, the descriptions

mirrored those of social classes: Academic students are allegedly rich, intelligent, ambitious, and hardworking, whereas vocational students are allegedly poor, unmotivated, unintelligent, and slack. Vocational students are also allegedly lazy, substance-abusing, with poor-language—stereotypes identified [6] about poor people in the US. In other words, "the school nurtures hierarchy-legitimizing myths among the youth who currently seem most likely to become tomorrow's academics and business and community leaders" [35:715].

Partly because of such stereotype content, low-SES students encounter many barriers when they enter college, especially if they are first-generation college students [for review, see 36]. Many challenges are subjective, due to unfamiliar middle-class norms and the norms' misfit with experiences or stereotypic images of working-class students. Consequences include feeling emotional distress and reduced well-being, managing a stereotyped identity and vulnerable self-perception as not belonging, as well as dealing with motivational issues in self-efficacy, goal-setting, and fear of failure. Interventions however follow from the interpersonal and societal dynamics described next.

Stereotypes in Cross-Class Encounters

SC can be signaled in many ways (e.g., clothes, tastes, manners, dialects, accents, attractiveness), and people accurately read those signals [37–39], changing their behavior (and even physiological responses; [38]). In other words, SC shapes social interactions.

Theoretically, cross-class encounters may elicit anxiety, leading individuals in work environments to conform to their class rules, through institutionalized, class-specific behavior (i.e., "class work") that restores a positive identity and reduces anxiety, at the cost of confirming and reinforcing the class distinction [40]. Cross-class encounters also potentially entail mutual mistrust of each class allegedly exploiting the other [41], but people from different classes confront different dilemmas. On one hand, expression of class identities can undermine the lower-SES group's efficacy [42], leading to contempt [5]. But the stereotyped lower-SES identity can also include warmth and trustworthiness. On the other hand, distrust of higher-SES professions (CEOs, lawyers, scientists) can create resentment and disbelief [43], at the same time as grudging respect.

Higher-status people trying to affiliate across class lines tend to talk down by adopting a well-intentioned but patronizing competence downshift—"getting down with the people"—perhaps to counteract their own stereotypic lack of warmth and trustworthiness [44,45]. Lower-status people trying to affiliate talk up by emphasizing competence to match their stereotype of the higher-status person. Race imitates status, as well-intentioned Whites, including presidential candidates, talk down to minority audiences [44,46]. Cross-class encounters can be socially dysfunctional in predictable ways because of ambivalent cross-class stereotypes.

At least in the US, SC even predicts how people spend their social time, creating another SC mismatch. Across races, people with higher incomes spend more time alone, and prefer to socialize with friends rather than family and neighbors (perhaps reflecting stereotypes that the privileged are cold, possibly because they are self-sufficient), compared to lower income

people [47]. Further, because SC impacts people's self-concept and cognitive style—with lower-SC individuals characterized by a more interdependent self and holistic cognitive style, and higher-SC individuals as more independent and analytical—this could impact the way people from lower versus higher SC pay attention to other human beings (i.e., the motivational relevance of others) [48**]. In three studies, using different materials and methodologies, higher- versus lower-SC individuals differed in their visual attention patterns: Higher SC individuals paid less attention to people and human faces than did lower SC individuals.

SC does not "operate in a vacuum, but rather intersect*s* with other social categories" [3:107]. At the intersection of SC and gender, low-SES female undergraduates are more at risk of the "slut stigma": Through the slut discourse, high-SES students can re-define "sluttiness" in the sense of sexual experimentation, in this way setting the moral boundaries between them and lower-SES college peers, who instead are more vulnerable to be stigmatized for their sexual behaviors [49]. However, the more general higher-class advantages do not always hold, but instead disappear for women in elite labor markets: When law firms evaluate candidates, higher-class men, but not women, receive the best evaluations compared to lower-class men and women. The stereotype of women as less committed to career because of being more devoted to family and childcare (i.e., warm) cancels the class-based advantage of higher-class people stereotyped as more competent [50].

The aspects of negative stereotypes targeting low-SES people can only be an additional burden in already difficult contexts. For instance, in the US, a typical criminal is seen as low-SES, and in mock jury studies low-SES offenders receive longer sentences than higher income offenders. Less is known about juvenile delinquents, who nowadays are more and more tried in adult courts, where they receive more severe punishments compared to juvenile courts [51]. In an experimental study, despite the low- (vs. high-) SES juvenile offender being more often found guilty and to a greater extent, he was also perceived as less capable of understanding the criminal court process and the consequences of his actions (i.e., less intelligent) and less mature. The harsher verdict toward the low-SES juvenile seemed in fact partially explained by the negative stereotype as a superpredator (i.e., cold and calculating). Therefore, paradoxically, the verdict is harsher, although the low-SES offender is considered less responsible [51].

Ambivalent Stereotypes and Nations' Inequality

Beyond educational institutions and justice systems, a nation's economic inequality reflects and shapes its stereotypes [9]. Ambivalent stereotypes describe a nuanced landscape of allegedly undeserving, untrustworthy poor people (e.g., homeless) who evoke contempt and neglect, versus deserving, trustworthy poor (e.g., disabled) who merit pity and help. Likewise, certain trustworthy professionals (doctors) deserve wealth, while allegedly untrustworthy others (lawyers) do not. Nations with high income-inequality display these complicated stereotype maps, which may subjectively justify and therefore stabilize their unequal systems.

In contrast, more equal nations display a larger societal ingroup that comprises everyone eligible for government support, groups all seen as relatively high on both warmth and competence. In contrast are a few groups (e.g., undocumented immigrants), low on both dimensions, who fall outside the social safety net. Equality does not require as complex a system of stereotypes to be stable.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Social-class stereotypes disfavor lower-SES people's competence (though sometimes granting them warmth), manifesting early in childhood and affecting achievement, reinforced by educational institutions. Academic situations are pregnant with arbitrary, implicit standards that advantage upper- middle-class students, perpetuating inequality. As suggested, "changing the construal that the classroom is a level playing field can offer better learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds" [34:8]. Teaching students about stereotype threat may help undermine its effects [24]. Further, although universities generate many of the barriers to achievement and belonging, some psychological interventions are effective: affirming self, educating about differences, and reframing goals from evaluation to learning [33,36].

Future work examining cross-class interaction should focus not on the top 1% but on the top 20%, whose privileges (private schools, tutoring, gated communities) maintain inequality at every life stage. We know less about stereotypes and privileges (or burdens) of higher-SES people, who may be both resented and admired. For example, higher-status people may hide their identity, to avoid uncomfortable comparisons [52]. Although the social and psychological burden clearly disadvantages lower-SES people, cross-class interactions need to be documented on both sides.

However, one lesson from cross-status encounters is that lower-status people seek respect [45,52], as well as recognition and influence [53]. Constructive cross-class contact—particularly if equal-status, authority-sanctioned, in-depth, and seriously interdependent [54]—can overcome prejudice and stereotypes. Being equal status within the context will be difficult for social-class intergroup contact to establish. But if it can, for example in sharing neighborhood or town governance, working side-by-side can seed the conditions of potential friendship that facilitates individuation. Cross-class friendships may reduce stereotypes and improve individuals' wellbeing, as cross-racial friendship does in interracial contexts [55].

Moving forward, we also need to know more about non-WEIRD settings [56]; most studies use US—and often university—samples. More diverse samples likely will reveal cultural similarities (SES rank is essentially universal) and differences (power distance differs). As noted, more unequal countries have more ambivalent stereotypes [9]; both extremely peaceful and extremely conflictual ones also have simpler us-them stereotypes, folding social class into a single good-bad vector [57]. Broadening the research net will mitigate the often-ambivalent social-class stereotypes that enable current extremes of inequality.

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Highlights

- Social class stereotypes depict low-income people as less competent than higher-income individuals, but perhaps warmer.

- Such stereotypes affect lower-SES children's as well as adults' academic achievement.

- Social class distinctions are institutionalized in education, becoming barriers for low-SES students.

- Cross-class encounters may confirm and reinforce mutual stereotypes.

- Unequal countries especially use ambivalent stereotypes (incompetent but warm poor, competent but cold rich).