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# Locating the Social Ladder Across Cultures and Identities

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It is rare to have the opportunity to write a theory paper on a topic that, we believe at least, will become a very important part of psychological research in the future. That this target article has sparked such a high level of sophistication in the commentaries is indicative of this possibility; psychologists have truly arrived at the forefront of the social class discussion, and we are very excited to be a part of it! In the spirit of moving forward this discussion, each of the commentaries raises a number of important points that intersect with our own theory. Engaging these points is to the benefit of future research, and so we have written this reply in an effort to integrate some of what has been described by our esteemed colleagues. Nevertheless, we cannot help but feel like children in a candy store: Where do we begin?

In this reply, we have chosen to focus exclusively on three broad themes that are highlighted most clearly by the target article. First, we discuss how our theory of social class relates to an understanding of culture and socialization. Second, we discuss the powerful phenomenon of local comparison, and its role in our theory. Third and finally, we consider the many forms of rank in society that define the social selves of individuals—with a focus on rank-based social identities aside from social class.

## Where Is the Culture in the Social Ladder?

Perhaps the clearest message in the commentaries that follow our target article is one suggesting that a rank-based perspective on social class fails to consider how class is situated within the broader cultural milieu (Brannon & Markus, this issue; Grossmann & Huynh, this issue; Leavitt & Fryberg, this issue; Stephens & Townsend, this issue). For instance, Leavitt and Fryberg (this issue) wonder if a rank-based perspective obscures precisely how models of the self shape, and are shaped by, the social class environment. Similarly, Stephens and Townsend (this issue) suggest that rank does not give enough credit to the sociocultural forces at work in the experience of social class—which are primarily responsible for disparities in health and education. Finally, Grossmann and Huynh (this issue) suggest that macro-level cultural factors situate experiences of rank within a much broader cultural landscape.

We agree that any theory of social class is incomplete without considering the larger cultural framework within which individuals are situated. Indeed, our theory of social class rank highlights many places where conceptions of one's rank are shaped by the surrounding social class context. Determining the origins of symbols of social class rank is one example worthy of future empirical study. Symbols of social class rank are likely to arise from the different social selves of individuals growing and developing within relatively lower- or upper-class contexts, and likely reflect the manners, tastes, and customs favored by the environments that shaped their development (e.g., Bourdieu, 1979; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Weininger & Lareau, 2009). As well, symbols of social class rank are likely to vary considerably between nations—which differ in many important ways, including their absolute levels of economic inequality (e.g., Norton & Ariely, 2011), dominant cultural practices (e.g., Grossmann & Varnum, 2011), and histories of class division (e.g., Mahalingham, 2003). Understanding the broader cultural context is necessary for a full conceptualization of social class, as well as social class rank, but this does not change one of the primary points of our theory: Signals of social class rank matter for determining, at least in part, the subjective experience of people from relatively lower- and upper-class backgrounds.

We agree with the fundamental assertion of a sociocultural model of the self, which suggests that the context surrounding one's social class position shapes the social self and patterns of relating to others (e.g., Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). We believe that it is an interesting empirical question to consider which psychological variables are shaped by the broader social class context, and in turn, are expressed in class-based patterns of behavior. In one empirical example of this work, Stephens and colleagues (2007) examined how the social selves of relatively upper-class individuals become socialized to value choice more than do individuals from relatively lower-class backgrounds (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

Despite this conceptual agreement, we strongly disagree with Leavitt and Fryberg's (this issue) suggestion that a rank-based perspective obscures, rather than clarifies, how social class shapes basic psychological processes. We contend that rank perceptions are another aspect (though not the only one) of the social self that is shaped by the social class context (for a review, see Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), and in our target article we have highlighted some testable predictions for determining the ways in which class rank manifests in social interactions and potentially shapes the ways in which individuals experience their social environments and define the social self. It is our intention that this rank-based perspective will be used to further specify the ways in which social class both shapes, and is shaped by, the surrounding social environment.

Stephens and Townsend (this issue) argue that a rank-based perspective on social class, by not focusing on the broader cultural context, is unable to explain the origins of social class hierarchy. We suggest, in contrast, that a rank-based perspective has some benefit in helping to highlight the motivations that lead individuals in high ranking positions on society's social ladder to legitimize social class hierarchy. For example, a large-scale online survey reveals that people who subjectively rank themselves high in social class on a 10-rung ladder are both more likely to believe that society is fair and to endorse essentialist beliefs about social class categories—beliefs that social class is inherent, stable, and biological (Kraus & Keltner, in press). In this research, perceptions of elevated rank enhanced beliefs that serve to reinforce and legitimize class hierarchies.

Stephens and Townsend (this issue) also assert that a rank-based perspective draws attention away from effective interventions that can help to reduce disparities in academic achievement and health. The authors then cite some impressive recent evidence demonstrating that a focus on different models of the social self has potential to reduce gaps in health (Townsend, Eliezer, Major, & Mendes, 2013) and academic achievement (Stephens et al., 2012) between relatively lower- and upper-class individuals. This evidence is impressive, but there are likely other avenues by which social class disparities in health and education can be diminished (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2007). We contend in our target article that one avenue could be the reduction of overt symbols of social class rank. Another avenue, alluded to by Norton (this issue), might be a focus on local rank as a buffering agent—individuals who attain social status within their local social groups may show elevated health and well-being despite their lower-class upbringing (e.g., Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012).

Grossmann and Huynh (this issue) raise an important point that highlights the infancy of social class research—namely, that much of the early groundwork has been laid using samples of convenience in the United States. This critical point should guide future research on social class and bears mentioning in any survey of psychological research. Although preliminary studies suggest consistency between nationally representative surveys (Independent Sector, 2002) and samples of convenience (e.g., Piff, Kraus, Cote, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010), there is still a great deal of work needed in this area. Likewise, cross-national studies of social class represent an important future endeavor (Grossmann & Varnum, 2010) and it is interesting to speculate about the macrolevel variables—such as the level of national economic inequality—that might shape between culture differences in the experience of social class rank. One intriguing potential piece of cross-cultural variation, brought up by Fiske (this issue), is that the stability of social class hierarchy may change the way that social class rank is experienced within a culture, as is the case in comparable animal models.

## **The Local Ladder Effect**

Both Norton (this issue) and Fiske (this issue) raise an important point related to social comparison that is sure to capture a great deal of our thoughts about this area of research for months moving forward. For Fiske, social class rank seems to be uniquely comparative when contrasted with other forms of social hierarchy. According to Fiske, these comparisons may lead to the systematic devaluing of lower-class individuals in some contexts but perhaps not others. The notion that certain countries, differing in inequality, have different judgments of warmth for poor and rich individuals would suggest such a pattern (Durante et al., 2013). The notion that a working-class identity may be associated with some positive stereotype content (i.e., work ethic) raises a number of promising future research questions. In particular, does claiming a working-class identity elevate workplace judgments of work ethic and competence, or alternatively, does it simultaneously devalue the other characteristics of working-class individuals—such as their intelligence—that then impedes their upward mobility within the workplace? As research on benevolent prejudice suggests, even seemingly positive aspects of stereotypes (e.g., commenting on the attractiveness of a female colleague) can have unintended negative consequences for low-status individuals (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996). These kinds of questions, and others like them, help to provide a more nuanced understanding of social class rank.

Norton (this issue) brings up a very interesting issue in the understanding of social class rank—that we are much more intimately aware of local rather than global rank within society (e.g., Norton & Ariely, 2011). This is an intriguing possibility that highlights the importance of the experience of social class rank within even the briefest of social interactions. As well, this local ladder perspective suggests a potential way in which class disparities in health and well-being can be diminished—specifically, perhaps local high-status trumps national low status in determining people's trajectories in health and well-being. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1930) so eloquently stated, “Beggars do not envy millionaires, though of course they will envy other beggars who are more successful” (p. 90). A second point concerns the ways in which class hierarchy can be legitimized and perpetuated. Specifically, political messages that focus on local prosperity may be employed strategically to obscure global inequality.

## **Rank and Its Multiple Forms**

The comments of Cheng and Tracy (this issue) as well as Brannon and Markus (this issue) raise important questions about the many ways in which individuals are ranked in society. Cheng and Tracy raise the possibility that signals of social class rank may bleed into other rank-related experiences—such as those related to judgments of respect in local social groups. How signals of social class contribute to the ability of individuals to dominate others or to enhance their own prestige in others' eyes is an intriguing line of future research. It is possible, though, that it is harder than one might think to use signals of social class rank strategically for one's benefit. Much of what signals social class rank has to do with manners, tastes, and preferences that arise from years growing and developing within a particular social class context, and so the strategic use of class rank symbols may be hard for individuals who do not possess the social selves from which those symbols originate (e.g., Bourdieu, 1979; Stephens & Townsend, this issue).

Brannon and Markus (this issue) highlight the importance of thinking about societal rank in terms of more than just social class. In particular, they highlight the long-standing history of racial oppression and discrimination faced by African Americans. Brannon and Markus suggest that it is important for future research to consider other rank-based identities in conjunction with social class because such a perspective is likely to reveal important insights into how a person defines her own rank in society as well as to uncover some ways in which individuals can be buffered against the experience of low rank.

As Brannon and Markus (this issue) argue, having multiple rank-based identities can make class-rank effects equivocal. For example, if one were to consider race as another form of rank-based identity,

we may not necessarily expect relatively upper-class African Americans to feel as high ranking as what a simple social class rank analysis would suggest. This is because upper-class African Americans can still, despite their high social class rank, face stereotype threat and “bear the burden” of their stereotypically low-status racial identity. Another possibility might be a rank-based buffering effect. For instance, lower-class individuals may experience boosts in health and well-being by focusing on aspects of the social self that are respected (e.g., respect among one's coworkers) or valued (e.g., a valued aspect of one's identity; Anderson et al., 2012). Brannon and Markus (this issue) also bring up the possibility that having multiple low-status identities could potentially increase one's skills for navigating the rank-based signals that permeate social interactions. That African Americans report higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression relative to other low-status groups is indicative of this possibility (Brannon & Markus, this issue).

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple,” says Oscar Wilde. We believe the same can be said of a theory of social class. The valuable commentaries that accompany our rank-based theory of social class have highlighted the complexity of this construct as well as the range of possible directions for future research. As researchers continue to locate the social ladder across cultures and identities, the insights that follow are sure to take our field in exciting new directions.

## Note

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