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Social class and prosocial behavior: current evidence, caveats, and questions

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This review synthesizes research on social class and prosocial behavior. Individuals of lower social class display increased attention to others and greater sensitivity to others' welfare compared to individuals of higher social class, who exhibit more self-oriented patterns of social cognition. As a result, lower-class individuals are more likely to engage in other-beneficial prosocial behavior, whereas higher-class individuals are more prone to engage in self-beneficial behavior. Although the extant evidence indicates that higher social class standing may tend to undermine prosocial impulses, we propose that the effects of social class on prosocial behavior may also depend on three crucial factors: motivation, identity, and inequality. We discuss how and why these factors may moderate class differences in prosociality and offer promising lines of inquiry for future research.

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“It is scarcity not sufficiency that makes people generous.”—Evans-Pritchard [1]

Record levels of economic inequality have brought differences between the lives of the rich and poor into stark relief [2]. To account for these disparities, some have denounced the wealthy as entitled, greedy, and morally corrupt [3]. Meanwhile, others have attributed economic divides to perceived moral failings of the poor, such as lack of industriousness [4]. These differing accounts converge on one central premise: Social class or socioeconomic status (SES)—an individual's rank vis-à-vis others

in society in terms of wealth, education, and occupational prestige—is intertwined with morality.

Here we review evidence underlying this claim. We examine how social class shapes a central dimension of moral life—prosociality, which refers to a broad suite of other-regarding social-cognitive and behavioral tendencies. These include attentiveness to others, prosocial emotion (*e.g.*, compassion), and personally costly actions (*e.g.*, sharing, helping) that prioritize others' needs over one's own [5]. We discuss why social class might shape levels of prosociality, before describing research indicating that lower-class individuals tend to show greater prosocial tendencies than their higher-class counterparts. However, the association between social class and prosociality is likely more multifaceted than initial findings suggest. Thus, we discuss factors that should influence these associations, highlighting pressing questions and future directions in the developing literature on social class and prosocial behavior.

Class differences in social attention and compassion

Higher-class individuals have more material resources and higher social rank than lower-class individuals, who have fewer resources and more subordinate rank in society. Greater control and freedom of choice [6], reduced vulnerability to threats [7,8], and an emphasis on individualism and personal accomplishment [9,10] promote an *internal, self-oriented focus* among higher-class individuals [11,12^{**}]. Lower-class individuals, by contrast, experience greater uncertainty in everyday work and home environments, which threatens their financial and socio-emotional well-being [13–15]. Heightened environmental threat, lower personal control, and increased vulnerability to others in the social environment lead lower-class individuals to adopt a more *external, other-oriented focus* [16,17]. Importantly, parallel lines of research on class-related processes find that increased feelings of control, heightened experiences of power, and societal trends of relative economic prosperity increase self-orientation and decrease attentiveness to others [18,19,20^{*},21].

Lower-class individuals' other-oriented focus is reflected in attentional patterns. In one study using eye-tracking technology, individuals who categorized themselves as lower class spent more time looking at other people in photos depicting street scenes, relative to those self-identifying as higher class [22^{*}]. Similarly, in interactions with strangers, lower-class individuals (measured by

subjective self-categorization) displayed more signs of engagement and active listening, whereas higher-class individuals fidgeted with nearby objects, looked away, and checked their cell phones—non-verbal signs of social disinterest [23].

Class differences in orientation to others extend to self-construal and social emotions. In one study, lower-class individuals (*i.e.*, those without a four-year college degree) reported more interdependent self-construals, defining themselves in terms of social roles and relationships, and they reported higher levels of socially engaged emotions (*e.g.*, friendliness, guilt) [24]. By comparison, higher-class individuals (*i.e.*, those with a four-year degree) defined themselves in terms of personal traits and distinctive characteristics.

Lower-class individuals exhibit more sensitivity to others' emotional well-being—an important precursor of prosocial behavior [5,25**]. In one representative study, as compared to higher-class (*i.e.*, college-educated) participants, those without a four-year degree more accurately identified others' emotional states from photographs depicting just their eyes [26]. The same brain regions associated with inferring others' mental states [27–30] were more active in lower-class than higher-class individuals (as indexed by a composite measure of household income and parental education levels) when reading narratives on personal thoughts and feelings [31]. Lower-class individuals (indexed by a composite of subjective SES, household income, and parental education) also displayed more intense empathic neural responses when viewing images of others in pain [32]. In another set of studies, lower-class individuals (measured by subjective self-categorization and by composites of subjective and objective indicators) displayed more physiological signs of concern (*e.g.*, heart rate deceleration) and self-reported greater compassion when observing a video depicting others' suffering [33], relative to their higher-class counterparts. To the extent that lower-class individuals are more attentive to others' well-being, as these lines of evidence suggest, they may also be more motivated to enhance the welfare of others through prosocial behavior.

Social class and prosocial behavior

We now turn to the central focus of our review: the relationship between social class and prosocial behavior. Lower-class individuals have fewer resources, and they may incur relatively higher personal costs for any prosocial act that requires resources, which one might expect to make them *less* prosocial. Our empirical review, however, indicates that lower-class individuals may be *more* likely than higher-class individuals to engage in prosocial behavior.

Studies find that higher-class and lower-class individuals differentially value others' needs as compared to their own. Higher-class individuals (indexed using both objective and subjective measures) self-report higher levels of entitlement and narcissism, constructs that reflect increased feelings of deservingness and self-importance vis-à-vis others [34–37]. In a large nationally representative sample, lower-class individuals (measured using a composite of income, assets, occupational prestige, and education) scored higher in agreeableness, a trait reflecting greater cooperative and compassionate tendencies, compared to higher-class individuals [38].

The most direct evidence for class differences in prosocial behavior emerges from studies allowing individuals to respond prosocially to a stranger, either remotely or face-to-face [5,39]. In one representative study, participants received 10 credits (later to be exchanged for cash) and chose whether to keep them or share a portion with another participant who received none. Those of lower subjective SES donated more credits [40**]. In another study, lower-income individuals offered more help to a clearly distressed confederate than did higher-income individuals. Inducing compassion—which reminded participants of others' needs—attenuated these class differences in helping. In a related experiment, individuals primed to feel lower in social class rank endorsed increased charitable donations compared to those primed to feel higher in social class rank. This study simultaneously revealed an independent effect of objective social class: Lower-income individuals were more charitable than higher-income individuals. These results indicate that both objective and subjective (even temporary) perceptions of social class rank can alter prosociality.

Studies among children are in keeping with the claim that lower-class individuals tend to behave more prosocially. Both American and Chinese children from lower-income families donate more desirable objects (*e.g.*, prize tokens, stickers) to friends, anonymous peers, or sick kids compared to children from higher-income families [41,42]. These findings indicate, somewhat provocatively, that class differences in prosociality may manifest early in development.

Class differences in self-interest may drive class differences in unethicity, or tendencies to break certain normative rules (*e.g.*, by cheating, lying), particularly when self-interest is at stake. A large cross-cultural study of 27 nations found that higher-income individuals approved more of unethical actions, such as cheating on taxes or accepting bribes, than lower-income individuals [43]. In observational field studies, drivers of expensive high-status cars were more likely than drivers of cheaper low-status cars to cut off pedestrians or other drivers [44]. Other studies have found that those of higher subjective SES are more likely to take valued goods from

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