Social class and identity-based motivation

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Attainments often fall short of aspirations to lead lives of meaning, health, happiness and success. Identity-based motivation theory highlights how social class and cultural contexts affect likelihood of shortfalls: Identities influence the strategies people are willing to use to attain their goals and the meaning people make of experienced ease and difficulty. Though sensitive to experienced ease and difficulty, people are not sensitive to the sources of these experiences. Instead, people make culturally-tuned inferences about what their experiences imply for who they are and could become and what to do about it. American culture highlights personal and shadows structural causes of ease and difficulty, success and failure. As a result, people infer that class-based outcomes are deserved reflections of character.

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"My job is not to worry about those people, I'll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives" Mitt Romney (Republican Presidential Nominee), May 17th, 2012, To Prospective Donors.

"We risk hitting a tipping point in our society where we have more takers than makers in society, where we will have turned our safety net into a hammock that lulls able bodied people into lives of dependency and complacency which drains them of their will and incentive to make the most of their lives." Paul Ryan (Republican Vice Presidential Nominee), August 2nd, 2012, McIver Institute Interview.

"If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you." Bill Clinton (Democratic President), Dec 3rd, 1993, Democratic Leadership Council.

As reflected in our opening quotes, Americans believe that place in society is a choice reflecting individual traits and characteristics: Those who fail are at fault. They lack forward thinking, ability and willpower. They do not take responsibility for themselves or for their lives. Hence giving people a hand is a bad idea, undermining drive and initiative. This line of reasoning implies that class-based differences reflect individual problems and are not a failing of society. In the current paper we use identity-based motivation theory to explain why Americans may be particularly tuned to this interpretation of what social class is and hence tuned to particular policy solutions to class-linked differential life outcomes. We outline how social class powerfully impacts which identities come to mind and what these identities imply for meaning making and behavior while remaining invisible as a cause and how to intervene and change these effects.

Our organizing framework is identity-based motivation theory; a situated social psychological theory of motivation and goal pursuit (self-regulation) [1••,2••]. People believe that they know who they are and that who they are matters for what they do, that their own and other peoples' choices and actions reflect who they are and might become–their current and possible future identities. People prefer to act and make sense of their experiences in identity-congruent ways. However, even though identities feel stable, which identities come to mind and what they seem to mean are sensitively attuned to context. Identities mediate and moderate the effect of context by influencing the strategies people are willing to use and the meaning they make of their experiences of ease and difficulty. People are sensitive to their experiences of ease and difficulty but not necessarily to the source of these experiences [3]. Hence, people are likely to make culturally tuned inferences about what these experiences of ease and difficulty imply for who they are or could become and what to do about it [1••,2••]. Figure 1 depicts this process as five numbered paths connecting context, identities,[1] and life outcomes. As detailed in the next sections, context influences life outcomes (Path 1) and identity-based motivation (Path 2). Identity-based motivation influences life outcomes (Path 3) and changes how

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[1] *Identities* [4] can be social roles and relationships or personal traits and attributes; they are valenced, temporal, and nested in self-concepts. Self-concepts [4], are organizing structures (e.g., first person immersed, third person distal, independent, interdependent).

Figure 1
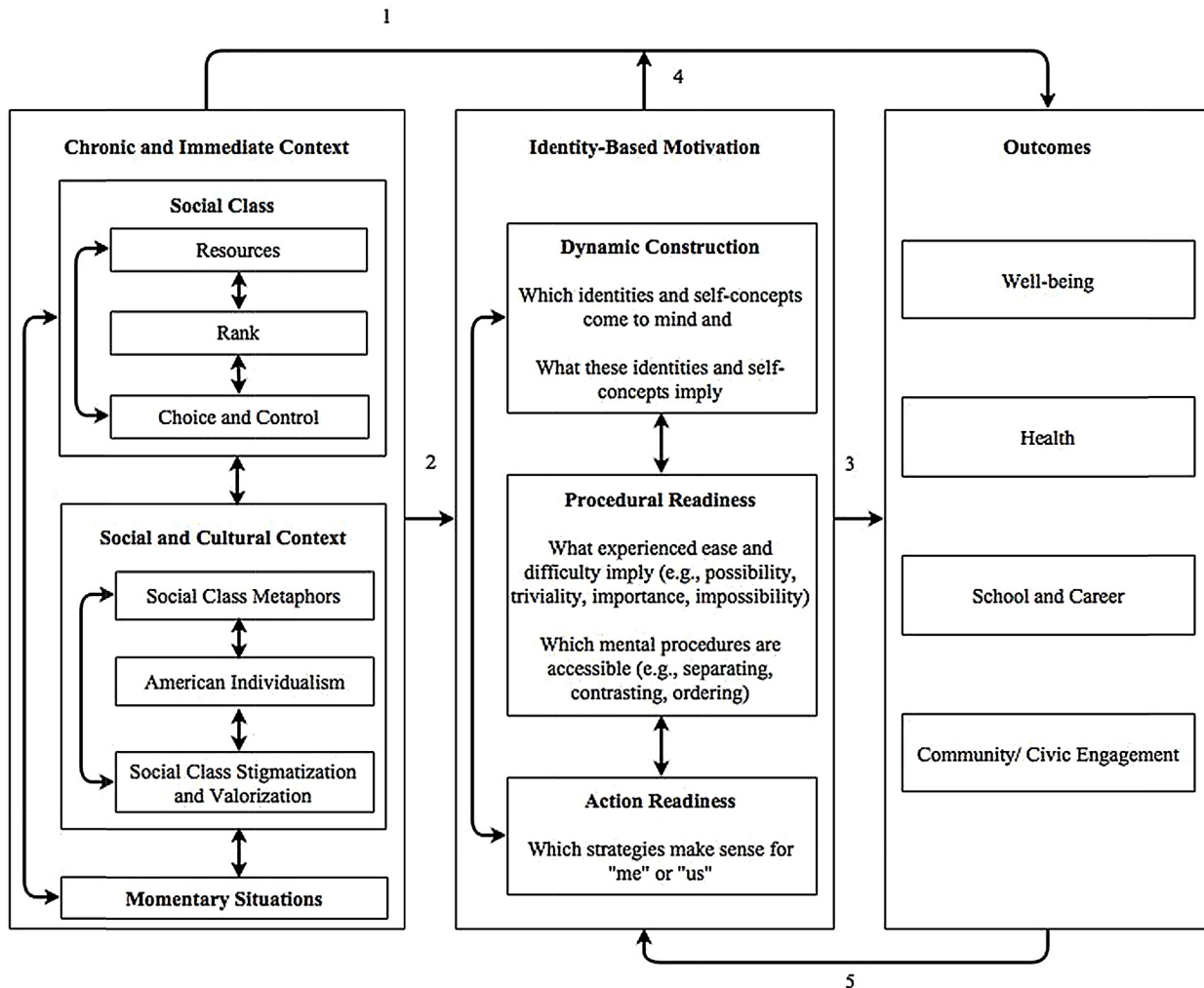
Identity-based motivation and social class, a process model.

context matters (Path 4). Life outcomes have downstream consequences by influencing which identities are likely come to mind and what these identities will seem to imply (Path 5).

Context
Social class: resources, rank, choice and control

Standing in the social hierarchy of a society or 'social class' is some combination of social rank (e.g., occupational prestige, subjective social standing, preferences and tastes) and resources (e.g., power, wealth, income, education) [3,5–8].[2] Social class does not affect aspirations [11,12] but it matters nonetheless: people with low

standing in the social hierarchy are more likely to have unstable incomes and jobs with shifting schedules and hours and uncertain continuity [6,12,13•]. This instability reduces ability to budget, control one's earnings, and plan one's time and schedule, undermining sense of choice and control over one's life [6,14,15]. In addition to lower occupational [7,16] and educational [17,18] attainment, low social class is associated with worse life outcomes — worse mental health and wellbeing [6,19], less physical health and longevity [6,20,21], and less communal engagement [22,23].

Social and cultural context
Social class metaphors

People use metaphors to make sense of abstract concepts like social class. Metaphors are not figures of speech clouding reasoning; they are necessary for reasoning about abstract concepts [24]. People carry knowledge from the metaphor to their understanding of the concept

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[2] Operationalizations of what class is differ, with sociologists focusing on the power of elites to control access to resources, influence lawmakers and shape societies and distinguishing elites from the masses and from mid-range "white collar" workers. In contrast, psychologists focus on education and subjective status, mostly comparing those with and without college degrees [9,10].

[24,25]. Culture matters by influencing the metaphors people are likely to use [25,26]. We argue that people think about social class the way they do about power, as being up or down [27]: 'High' class is understood as being 'above' and 'low' class is understood as being 'below.' The verticality metaphor of social class can be expressed as stratum of a rock formation implying difference in height due to circumstance or fate (e.g., the situation one is born into [5,8]). Strata metaphors for social class could imply that government action is needed to support the wellbeing of citizens in each stratum [3]. Social class can also be understood as a rung on a ladder, implying that difference in height is due to ability, initiative, or effort, e.g., ability or willingness to climb or scale [5,8]. A ladder metaphor for social class does not require government action because government is not culpable. Using the ladder metaphor makes government action sensible only if rungs are broken or the ladder has been pulled away [28], as in our opening quote that "people who work hard and play by the rules should be able to go as far as their God-given talent will take them".

American individualism
American individualism, a cultural mindset rooted in the Protestant Ethic, equates economic success with good character, valorizing success and stigmatizing failure as lack of divine favor or grace [26,29]. Given this idea that success is person-based and due to personal agency, in American cultural context, the ladder is a culturally fluent metaphor for the abstract idea of social class. Because it is culturally fluent, the ladder metaphor is experienced as what class actually is, as inherently true, a fact about the world [26,29].

Social class stigmatization and valorization
If the abstract concept of social class is concretized metaphorically as a ladder, then people understand characteristics of ladders as being relevant to social class. Hence, climbing is possible, a choice; and one's place in social hierarchy (social class) is understood as the height one has attained on the ladder of social class. Class, understood this way, is a marker of one's character, initiative and will, revealing future orientation, planfulness, willpower, tenacity, and ability. Failing to climb or falling down implies that one lacks good character and so low social class should be stigmatizing. Reviews of the literature support this prediction for health [6,13•] and academic outcomes [12]. Low social class is negatively stereotyped as a stigma (a mark of flawed character) while high social class is positively stereotyped or valorized as a mark of good character [12,30,31]. As seen in our opening quotes, Americans respond to low social class as a negative marker of effort, initiative, and ability, distinguishing 'worthy' (poor through no fault of their own) and 'unworthy' poor, those whose poverty is due to character [32]. Within an American individualistic frame, effort builds character. Hence policies to help those low in

the social hierarchy are viewed with suspicion as possibly draining people of their will to climb, "lulling people into lives of complacency."

Identity-based motivation
Identity-based motivation theory explains the identity to action interface with particular focus on why people often fail to act soon enough or persistently enough in pursuit of goals they set for themselves. Research linking the three components of identity-based motivation to culturally-tuned inferences about social class are summarized next.

Dynamic construction
If the ladder metaphor shapes perception of social class as diagnostic of ability, then people of different social classes should experience themselves as competent or incompetent in the domains associated with their social class (e.g., schoolwork, healthy living). Moreover, because the ladder metaphor implies that outcomes are due to individual character, the effects of social class on chances for choice and control should go unnoticed (Path 2). Evidence supports this prediction: contextual uncertainty can be motivating if one believes in one's own ability [33] but those low in social class often do not [34,35]. They are less likely to believe that if they try, they can succeed and this lack of efficacy mediates the relationship between social class and academic and health disparities [34,35]. Higher social class participants believe that their status is fair and deserved and that others could achieve if they tried whether class is assessed [36] or manipulated [37,38]. High social class is associated with more personal entitlement [39], greater self-esteem [40•], less perspective-taking and less concern for others [41]. Low social class (whether assessed or manipulated) increases belief that social class is fixed, stable, and rooted in biology [37] as well as feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and worry [40•]. Experimental manipulations of social class [36,37,40•,41,42] document dynamic construction in action. For example in one study [40•], participants played an economic game; some participants were told they would have fewer resources than others. Knowing one had fewer resources increased reported shame, guilt, and embarrassment implying that culturally-tuned meaning interacts with immediate context to create identity content.

Procedural readiness
If the ladder metaphor shapes perception of social class as diagnostic of ability, then people should be ready to interpret their experiences of ease and difficulty, success and failure in light of their social class (Path 2). The ladder metaphor implies that those higher up on the ladder have more ability so their successes are deserved while those lower on the ladder have less ability so their failures are also deserved. Hence, while experiencing difficulty might imply the importance of trying for those higher up the ladder, it implies the impossibility of success for those

lower down the ladder. There is some evidence that this is the case, low income is associated with more endorsement of the idea that experienced difficulty means impossibility [43•] and high education is associated with more endorsement of the idea that experienced difficulty means importance [44]. Critically, researchers have manipulated what social class implies for ability directly — showing that social class carries an interpretation of experienced difficulty as implying 'not for me' for lower class students. In one study [45•], middle school students were asked to solve difficult problems, some first received training on how to solve the problems and others did not. Sometimes performance was public — students had to raise their hands each time they solved a problem. This undermined performance of working class students (Path 3) unless they were given pre-performance prep and told that others might have gotten extra prep. This implies that working class students were interpreting experienced difficulty as impossibility unless given an alternative interpretation that it was difficult for them because they had not gotten extra prep tutoring (Path 4).

Action readiness

If social class is perceived metaphorically as a ladder, your place on the ladder tells you something about yourself, so you should be ready to act in ways that fit your place on the ladder (Path 3). This seems to be the case [46–48]. Bringing one's low social class to mind undermines college student's [49] and children's school performance [50] and health choices [50]. It also influences willingness to delay gratification — since later is uncertain and the path to get there may be blocked [11]. Lower social class (whether assessed or manipulated) is associated with a greater willingness to borrow [51], and a greater focus on pressing needs [52]. Future uncertainty may explain seemingly present-focused choices among people of lower class: higher likelihood of smoking [53], greater appeal of for-profit schools offering faster career route compared to four-year colleges offering a less clear route [54], and unhealthy eating (when class is manipulated [55•]).

Components operate in tandem

The impact of context is perhaps best understood by considering that the three components (dynamic construction, action-readiness and procedural-readiness) operate in tandem so that cuing one activates the others via spreading activation. Once one component is turned on, the others are as well so that a cued identity or taking action or an interpretation of experienced ease or difficulty can start the process. A number of brief interventions shed light on this process. Each intervention shows that it is possible to change the culturally-attuned automatic association of low social class with low effort, initiative, and ability (dynamic construction of identity). Each also changes, the idea that people like 'me' cannot use effective strategies (action-readiness) and should interpret their experienced difficulty as signs of the impossibility of success (procedural-readiness). Each provides an alternative identity narrative: that people like 'me' use effective strategies and see experienced difficulty as a signal of value and goal importance [56]. To create this narrative, interventions can target all three identity-based motivation components [56] or one or two (e.g., bolstering belonging ('I' am part of this 'we') [57]; linking strategies for success to identity ('people like me can do this') [58,59] providing reminders of one's worth ('I can handle this, I am a worthy person') [60]). Because the components operate in tandem, intervening to activate one component activates the others via spreading activation of associative knowledge networks.

Synthesis

Identity-based motivation theory clarifies the process by which social class matters. Social class entails access to resources, choice, and control as well as inferences about what experiences of ease and difficulty, success and failure imply. American individualism colors how people understand social class — the culturally-tuned ladder metaphor valorizes those high in social class as having will and ability and stigmatizes those low in social class as lacking will and ability. The combination of a ladder metaphor with American individualism means that the culturally-tuned inference Americans are likely to draw from their experiences of ease and difficulty, success and failure, is that these experiences are reflective of who they are and can become.

The alternative inference, that these experiences are reflective of the affordances and constraints of momentary and chronic features of the contexts they are in and hence social structural rather than personal, is culturally disfluent [26,29]. Culturally disfluent inferences are unlikely to come to mind and, if brought to mind, are likely to feel wrong, requiring systematic scrutiny [26,29]. Culturally tuned inferences frame what experienced ease and difficulty seem to imply for who one is and might become, for whether one's aspirations feel attainable — so pursuing them is worthwhile, and for policy — for whether, when, and how government should intervene.

Identity-based motivation theory predicts that class identities and what they imply for meaning–making and behavior are dynamically constructed in context. Supporting evidence comes from two sources: one-time experiments and brief interventions. Experiments show that in the moment, manipulating subjective sense of status, power, and resources matters [36,37,40•,41]. Brief interventions show that it is possible to change the automatic association of low social class with low effort, initiative, and ability by providing an alternative narrative [56–60]. These interventions matter, changing the otherwise negative effect of low social class on outcomes. To understand more about how this process unfolds over time, future research is needed to detail how changes in

outcomes change identity-based motivation (Path 5) and how culture matters by changing what feels fluent (Path 1, [61]). That is, how people consequently come to understand who they are and might become, what their experiences of ease and difficulty imply for their chances, and their downstream behaviors.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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