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Social class group identity, intergroup attitudes, and views on social mobility and inequality in the U.K. and the U.S.

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Abstract
Drawing on social identity theory (SIT), this study explored social class group identity, intergroup attitudes, and views about social mobility and inequality among socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse adults in the U.K. ($n = 457$) and the U.S. ($n = 595$). U.K. participants evidenced greater consensus about the social class groups present in their society than did U.S. participants, but lower, working, middle, and upper class were commonly perceived in both contexts, and many participants self-identified as working class (38% U.K., 17% U.S.) or middle class (45% U.K., 47% U.S.) Consistent with SIT, participants in both contexts identified *with* their social class ingroup (e.g., felt they belonged) and stereotyped it less harshly on dimensions (warmth or competence) on which it was generally negatively stereotyped. Importantly, middle and upper class participants tended to feel more positively (e.g., proud) about their ingroup, and believed society was more fair and equal, and upward mobility more likely, than did lower and working class participants.

PUBLIC SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT
This study found that, in the U.K. and the U.S., people mainly identified as lower, working, middle, or upper class, and people who identified with higher-status social class groups saw society as more fair, equal, and open to upward mobility. These results suggest that gaining cross-class support for reducing inequalities requires first addressing people's underlying beliefs about how society currently works.

INTRODUCTION

As economic inequality rises around the world and generates frequent comparisons between the "haves" and the "have nots," psychological scientists are increasingly investigating social class from social-cognitive (Kraus et al., 2012), cultural (Stephens et al., 2014), and identity-based (Destin et al., 2017) approaches. Yet, as deepening social class disparities change the way that people perceive themselves (Jetten et al., 2017) and others (Durante & Fiske, 2017), central questions remain about *how* people identify as members of social class groups and the implications of this increasingly salient group membership (Peters et al., 2021) for people's attitudes about their changing societies. To begin to address these questions, this exploratory study investigated: (1) how people represent and identify with social class as a group identity and (2) how social class group membership shapes people's perceptions and beliefs about social class and inequality in society. The design drew on social identity theory (SIT) and included two socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse samples, one from the United Kingdom and one from the United States.

Defining social class

Social class has been variously defined, including as "a context rooted in both the material substance of social life (wealth, education, work) and the individual's construal of his or her class rank" (Kraus et al., 2012), an "individual or group's relative position in an economic-social-cultural hierarchy" (Diemer et al., 2013), and a set of experiences that "shape the type of self that one is likely to become and define the behaviors that are likely to be experienced as normative" (Stephens et al., 2014). These definitions of social class do incorporate dimensions of socioeconomic status (SES), such as income, education, and occupation that are more commonly assessed in psychological science, as well as perceptions of relative rank emphasized in measures of subjective social status (SSS). However, critically, these definitions also acknowledge social class as a *group* identity, with implications for how people think about themselves and relate to the social world (Jetten et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2014).

Surprisingly, however, psychological scientists currently know comparatively less about *how* people identify with their social class ingroup, including how they represent distinctions between their own and other groups, explore and commit to a social class group identity, or the emotional value or significance they place on this group membership. We know comparatively more about, for example, how people stereotype researcher-described social class groups (Fiske, 2018) or think about whether or not society is fair for members of different social class groups (Jost, 2019). This study sought to bridge this gap, with a dual focus on how people think about social class as a group identity and the implications of this group membership for people's views on society.

Theoretical framework: social identity theory

In line with this group identity focus, we drew on SIT as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Briefly, SIT makes three main predictions about group identity and intergroup attitudes (Brown, 2000; Hogg, 2016; Hornsey, 2008). (1) People make ingroup/outgroup categorizations and hold beliefs about groups' relative status, the permeability of group boundaries, and the fairness of the status relationship. (2) People are motivated to feel positively about their ingroup and to explain the social world using group differences. (3) People in higher status groups seek to preserve their rank while people in lower status groups seek to avoid stigma by joining higher status groups or redefining their ingroup's value.

In line with an SIT perspective, this study sought to do two things. First, we sought to describe how people represent and identify with social class as a group identity. That is, we were interested in documenting what social class groups people think are "out there" in society, how they distinguish these groups from each other, which group(s) they claim membership in, how they define their ingroup, and to what extent they attach emotional significance to their social class ingroup. Second, we sought to assess associations between these self-generated social class groups and people's intergroup attitudes about social class and inequality in society.

Prior research in this area has sometimes asked similar questions about identification and attitudes using proxies for social class social such SES or SSS. As summarized below, the results of these prior studies are not always consistent. Taking a squarely social class group-based (rather than SES or SSS based) approach, we explored these questions about group identity and perceptions of society from an SIT perspective with diverse samples in the U.K. and the U.S.

Social class in the U.K. and the U.S

The U.K. and the U.S. are two unique but similar contexts with respect to social class. On the one hand, the more historically established class system in the U.K. may make social class differences especially salient, while the American Dream ideology of unlimited opportunity may promote perceptions of a "classless" society (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Savage et al., 2013). On the other hand, both countries share a cultural emphasis on meritocracy (Jost, 2019; Manstead, 2018) when actual upward mobility is increasingly difficult (Piketty & Saez, 2014). Likewise, large surveys of nationally representative samples reveal a tendency to identify with two main social class groups in both contexts; specifically, 30%–60% of U.K. adults and 10%–30% of U.S. adults identify as working class and 20%–40% of U.K. adults and 40%–60% of U.S. adults identify as middle class (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Marsden et al., 2020).

Overall, we expected more similarities than differences across the two contexts explored here. With the exception of descriptive comparisons of groups listed in the U.K. and the U.S., we did

not aim to standardize samples or directly contrast the meaning or function of social class across contexts. Rather, we aimed to explore how people represent social class and the implications for their intergroup attitudes, and the extent to which similar patterns emerged in both countries suggesting a degree of generalizability across these two contexts.

RQ1: social class as a group identity

From an SIT perspective, social categorization is the first step toward group identification and intergroup attitudes. To explore how people represent social class as a group membership, our first research question addressed what social class groups people perceived in their society and how they distinguished these groups from each other, which groups they claimed as their own and why, and to what extent they attached emotional significance to their social class ingroup membership.

Social class group representations

Comparatively few studies to date have taken an explicitly group-based approach to investigating what people think it *means* to be working class, middle class, etc. A related body of research suggests that people describing SSS go beyond material indicators such as income and education to include some social and cultural indices such as food, clothing, and leisure activities (Destin et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2017). Yet, as a group membership, social class should be even *more* closely tied to social and cultural referents (e.g., what "we" are like) than is SSS (Easterbrook et al., 2023).

For example, there is evidence that people in the U.K. sometimes reference their parents' and grandparents' lives and origins when identifying their own social class, drawing on family history to describe why, for example, they feel working class when factors such as their current occupation might lead others to place them at middle class (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Friedman et al., 2021). In order to learn *how* people categorize themselves and others into social class groups, we recruited samples diverse in age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and income and asked participants to name and describe all of the social class groups they perceived in their society, identify which group they belonged to, and explain why.

Social class group identity

From an SIT perspective, an important second step to group identification concerns the "emotional value and significance" that people attach to their self-identified ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). On this point, prior studies found that adults in the U.K. viewed their education, profession, and income (potential contributors to social class identity) as just as important to them as other group identities commonly studied by SIT researchers including ethnicity, gender, and nationality (Easterbrook et al., 2020), and that emerging adults in the U.S. perceived that their social class played an even more central role in their daily experiences at university than did their gender or ethnicity (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Likewise, an established body of work with people receiving welfare benefits in the U.S. has shown that internalizing the stigma associated with welfare receipt is associated with distancing oneself from people experiencing poverty (Bullock, 2013), and research with people who feel they are currently changing from one social class to another has revealed that this experience can be associated with feelings of uncertainty and discomfort (Des-

tin et al., 2017). Yet, to date, understanding how people from multiple social class groups identify *with* their ingroup, imbuing it with emotional value and significance, remains an under-studied but theoretically key area from an SIT perspective.

To address these questions, we borrowed from an established literature on racial and ethnic identity to investigate two dimensions, centrality and private regard, and two processes, exploration and commitment. Centrality is the extent to which someone considers their group a core part of their self-concept and private regard involves positive feelings about the ingroup (Sellers et al., 1998). Exploration is the extent to which someone has considered what their group membership means to them and commitment involves feelings of similarity and belonging with the ingroup (Phinney, 1992).

The constructs of centrality, private regard, exploration, and commitment align well with SIT's propositions that people derive a large part of their identity from their social group memberships, feel similarity and belonging with ingroup members, and are motivated to feel positively about their group. Moreover, though sparse, there is some initial evidence in support of some of these dimensions and processes in contexts related to social class. For example, people who identify with social class groups considered higher status rate their group membership as more important to them (Easterbrook et al., 2020) and report less desire to change social class groups (Aries & Seider, 2007) than people who identify with social class groups considered lower status. Similarly, one study focused on education found that people with university degrees reported stronger feelings of solidarity, similarity, centrality, and satisfaction with their education ingroup than did people without university degrees (Kuppens et al., 2015). To learn about how people attach emotional value and significance to their *social class* group membership rather than related scale constructs such as SSS or SES, we asked participants in the current study to report on centrality, private regard, exploration, and commitment.

RQ2: social class group identity and views on society

According to SIT, in addition to group identity (i.e., which group do I belong to and how do I feel about it), people form beliefs about the fairness and permeability of group status hierarchies and adjust their views on their own group (e.g., ingroup biases) and other groups (e.g., stereotypes) accordingly. To explore how social class group membership might shape intergroup attitudes and perceptions of social class and societal inequality, our second research question addressed social class stereotypes, beliefs about societal fairness, perceptions of economic mobility, and views on wealth stratification.

Stereotypes

A well-established body of research on social class stereotypes has demonstrated that people evaluate groups on two main dimensions: warmth (e.g., trustworthiness, friendliness) and competence (e.g., capability, assertiveness), and together these dimensions elicit specific emotional responses (Fiske, 2018). In both the U.K. and the U.S., overall, rich people are stereotyped as competent but cold, eliciting envy and jealousy, poor people are stereotyped as both incompetent and cold, eliciting disgust and contempt, and working class and middle class people are stereotyped as both competent and warm, eliciting pride and admiration (Durante et al., 2013, 2017; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2023). Less research has assessed stereotypes about the numerous intermediate groups that people perceive (e.g., lower middle class, upper middle class; Andersen & Curtis, 2012)

or investigated how social class ingroup membership *shapes* people's stereotypes. Theoretically, ingroup biases in stereotyping might operate in either direction, that is, people might stereotype their ingroup more positively on its positively stereotyped dimension or less negatively on its negatively stereotyped dimension.

Societal fairness

The question of how people's social class group membership might inform their perceptions of societal fairness is a contentious one. Overall, research indicates that people are motivated to justify and defend existing social, economic, and political systems because doing so fulfills cognitive and emotional needs for reducing uncertainty and threat (Jost, 2019). Several studies show that, in the U.S., people from lower-SES backgrounds report stronger beliefs along these lines than people from higher-SES backgrounds (Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003), potentially fulfilling a need to believe that systems are fair and support their potential for upward mobility. However, this conclusion has been challenged by recent studies indicating that people who identify as higher in SSS report stronger system justification beliefs than people who identify as lower in SSS (Brandt, 2013; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). This latter evidence is more closely aligned with SIT's premise that people in higher-status groups aim to preserve their status, in this case by fulfilling a need to believe they earned it in a fair system, and may form a stronger basis for predictions about the role of social class (rather than SES or SSS) in shaping these perceptions.

Economic mobility

Relatedly, data from the U.S. indicate that people tend to over-estimate overall rates of economic mobility in society (Browman et al., 2022; Kraus & Tan, 2015) and perceive upward economic mobility (e.g., moving "up" in life) as more likely than downward economic mobility (Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Shariff et al., 2016). However, while some studies show that people who identify as higher in SSS perceive more upward mobility than people who identify as lower in SSS (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Weiss et al., 2022), other studies find that people who report lower incomes perceive more upward *and* downward mobility than people who report higher incomes (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015), and still other studies identify no SES differences in mobility perceptions (Davidai, 2018). Thus, there is inconsistency in prior research using SSS or SES rather than social class to examine relations with people's beliefs about economic mobility in their societies. These findings, as well, may (or may not) support the SIT idea that people belonging to higher status social class groups may aim to preserve their status, again by believing "we" earned it in society where others can do the same.

Wealth stratification

Finally, around the world, people tend to under-estimate the true degree of current economic inequality or wealth stratification in their society yet simultaneously believe that their society is more unequal or more economically stratified than it should be (Arsenio, 2018; Browman et al., 2022; Davidai, 2018; Evans & Kelley, 2017; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Norton & Ariely, 2011). It is not yet clear how social class group membership might inform people's views on actual or ideal levels of wealth stratification.

The current study

Thus, this study aimed to address two key research questions: (1) how do people represent and identify with social class as a group identity and (2) how does social class group membership shape people's intergroup attitudes about social class and societal inequality? We examined these questions with diverse samples from the U.K. and the U.S. We relied on SIT to formulate general predictions but considered all analyses exploratory given that social class is a relatively new group identity to be investigated from this theoretical perspective.

Predictions

RQ1: Social class as a group identity

We expected participants to perceive at least four social class groups in their societies: poor, working class, middle class, and rich (or similar) (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Durante & Fiske, 2017), and to primarily identify as working class or middle class, with higher rates of working class in the U.K. and middle class in the U.S. (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Marsden et al., 2020). We explored similarities and differences across contexts in the social class groups people perceived and the indices people used to socially categorize themselves and others (e.g., educational attainment, relative rank). We expected people to identify *with* their social class ingroup (Easterbrook et al., 2020), but expected people identifying with higher status groups (e.g., affluent) to identify more strongly than people identifying with lower status groups (e.g., poor), and explored whether this was evident for exploration, commitment, centrality, private regard, or all four dimensions and processes.

RQ2: Social class group identity and views on society

We expected people to express social class stereotypes (Durante & Fiske, 2017), but in ways that also reflected positively on their ingroup, and explored whether this was evident for warmth, competence, or both dimensions. We expected people to believe their society operated fairly (Jost, 2019), but also expected people identifying with higher status social class groups to justify the system more strongly. We expected people to perceive economic mobility as possible in their society (Kraus & Tan, 2015), but also expected people in higher status groups to perceive more mobility, and explored whether this was evident for upward mobility, downward mobility, or both. We expected people to believe their society was more economically unequal than it should be (Norton & Ariely, 2011), but also expected people in higher status groups to perceive more equality, and explored whether this was evident for society now, in the future, or both.

METHODS

Participants

A priori power analyses in G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) based on the most complex models described in the Analysis Plan below indicated that sample sizes of approximately 450 for the U.K. sample and 550 for the U.S. sample would be necessary to detect small to medium effects ($\eta_p{}^2 = .04$) with α at .05 and power at .80. Models were identical for both samples; the main con-

TABLE 1 Sample demographics.

	U.K. sample	U.S. sample
Age in years	38.28 (12.72)	38.16 (13.87)
Gender		
Woman	.56	.54
Man	.43	.45
Non-binary	.01	.01
Race/Ethnicity		
White	.33	.23
Black	.32	.22
Asian	.31	.24
Latinx	0	.29
Multi-racial	.04	.02
Generational status		
First generation	.31	.12
Second generation	.30	.33
Beyond second generation	.39	.55
Educational attainment	5.40 (1.43)	5.06 (1.85)
Annual income	4.48 (2.12)	4.58 (1.91)
Subjective social status	5.24 (1.72)	5.29 (1.77)

Note: U.K.: age range 18–74 years; education 1 = no formal qualifications to 8 = doctorate degree; income 1 ≤ £15,000 to 11 ≥ £250,001. U.S.: age range 18–79 years; education 1 = some high school to 8 = doctorate degree; income 1 ≤ $15,000 to 10 ≥ $500,001.

tributor to sample size differences was the number of racial/ethnic groups targeted for recruitment in each context (three in the U.K. and four in the U.S.; see Table 1).

The study was approved by the IRB at the University of Rochester: Study ID STUDY00006606. We recruited U.K. and U.S. residents via the online research platform Prolific.co in the fall and winter of 2021 to take part in a study "to learn how people in the United States and the United Kingdom think about social class in everyday life (e.g., in interpersonal relationships or broader society)." Participants were compensated £3.65/$5.00. Exclusions were rare; only 4 U.K. and 14 U.S. participants were excluded from the final sample because they did not respond to any of the open-ended questions. The final analytic samples included 457 U.K. and 595 U.S. participants.

We obtained considerable sample diversity in age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and income. We also collected generational status. Table 1 displays summary statistics and Tables S1–S3 in the Supplementary materials provide complete details. We intentionally recruited for racial/ethnic and SES diversity across gender and age groups. For example, in the U.K. sample: White (33%), Black (32%), and Asian (31%); annual income from <£15,000 to >£250,001; education from no formal qualifications to doctorate degree. In the U.S. sample: White (23%), Black (22%), Asian (24%), and Latinx (29%); annual income from <$15,000 to >$500,001; education from some high school to doctorate degree. In both samples, average education, income, and SSS did not differ by participant gender or race/ethnicity, and income and education were positively correlated; see the Supplementary materials for details.

Materials and measures

All survey measures were administered using Qualtrics XM. First, participants completed the social class groups, social class group membership, SSS, and social class group identity measures, in that order. Next, they completed the social class stereotypes, economic mobility, system justification, and wealth stratification measures in a random order. Finally, they provided demographic information, including about SES. Question order was randomized within all measures. Average time spent on the survey was 19.63 min ($SD = 10.70$) in the U.K. and 21.20 min ($SD = 13.7$) in the U.S.; no participants spent fewer than 5 min on the survey.

We do not have permission to post the data from this study, but we provide extensive descriptives (Supplementary materials) and complete study measures are available on OSF: https://osf.io/26uyf/

RQ1: social class as a group identity

Social class group representations

We asked: "[…] Please list all the social class groups that you think exist in the [U.K./U.S.] and tell us what first comes to mind when you think about each one." In anticipation of a wide variety of responses, we planned to analyze groups listed by at least 10% of at least one sample (i.e., U.K., U.S., or both). Then we asked: "[…] which one do you identify with the most? Please tell us why you chose that social class group."

Four team members coded "what comes to mind" and "why did you choose" responses into six non-exclusive conceptual categories expected based on existing definitions of social class (Destin et al., 2017; Diemer et al., 2013; Durante & Fiske, 2017; Jetten et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014), achieving high reliability. *Money*: represents social class in terms of money, wealth, income, benefits; $\kappa = .81–.92$; for example, "People and families who make more than $40K a year". *Work*: represents social class in terms of work, jobs, occupations, professions; $\kappa = .96–.98$; for example, "Unskilled workers in jobs like retail, care worker, warehouse". *Education*: represents social class in terms of education, level, access, quality; $\kappa = .75–.86$; for example, "Privately educated". *Rank*: represents social class in terms of relative rank, comparisons, mobility, stability; $\kappa = .74–.88$; for example, "One financial emergency away from homelessness". *Traits*: represents social class in terms of stable inter-individual differences in traits, character; $\kappa = .74–.88$; for example, "The lazy of society who have no work ethic". *Norms*: represents social class in terms of shared cultural norms, values, beliefs, lifestyle; $\kappa = .82–.92$; for example, "Family life is important; keep up with the people they went to school with by staying in the same area as they grew up in; vote Tory; read the tabloids". An unlimited number of codes per response were allowed. Responses that did not match any category were coded Other; $\kappa = .83–.88$.

Social class group identity

We created an 11-item measure of social class identity drawing on the exploration and commitment processes from the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) and the centrality and private regard dimensions from the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers et al.,

1998). Three statements assessed exploration; U.K. $r = .65$, $r = .37$, $r = .35$, U.S. $r = .70$, $r = .45$, $r = .42$; for example, "I have often done things that will help me understand my social class background better". Three statements assessed commitment; U.K. $r = .56$, $r = .36$, $r = .30$, U.S. $r = .59$, $r = .38$, $r = .37$; for example, "I have a strong sense of belonging with people who share my social class". Two statements assessed centrality; U.K $r = .68$, U.S $r = .72$; for example, "Being a member of my social class group is an important reflection of who I am". Three statements assessed private regard; U.K. $r = .76$, $r = .75$, $r = .71$, U.S. $r = .78$, $r = .78$, $r = .73$; for example, "I feel proud to be the social class that I am". All statements used a scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*. For analyses we calculated participants' averages on each process/dimension.

Subjective social status

Additionally, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000), which asks participants to place themselves on a 10-rung ladder where 1 = the people with the least money, least education, and least respected jobs and 10 = the people with the most money, most education, and most respected jobs, with reference to either the U.K. or the U.S. This measure was included for comparison with past research and was not central to our hypotheses.

RQ2: social class group identity and views on society

Social class stereotypes

We assessed stereotypes about seven social class groups: poor, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class, and affluent using the warmth and competence dimensions from the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002). For each group, four questions assessed competence; U.K. $\alpha = .91$, U.S. $\alpha = .91$; for example, "How intelligent are the following groups?" and four questions assessed warmth; U.K. $\alpha = .90$, U.S. $\alpha = .92$; for example, "How friendly are the following groups?" All questions used a scale from 1 = *Not At All* to 5 = *Extremely*. For analyses we calculated participants' averages on both dimensions for each social class group.

Societal fairness

We used a standard 8-item system justification measure (Kay & Jost, 2003). All statements used a scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*; U.K. $\alpha = .87$, U.S. $\alpha = .85$; for example, "everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness".

Economic mobility

We assessed perceptions of economic mobility using an 8-item measure adapted from Day and Fiske (2017). Three statements assessed perceptions of upward mobility; U.K $r = .52$, $r = .41$, $r = .31$, U.S. $r = .65$, $r = .50$, $r = .47$; for example, "There are a lot of opportunities for people to climb up the social ladder". Three statements assessed perceptions of downward mobility; U.K. r

= .37, r = .36, r = .30, U.S. r = .66, r = .41, r = .38; for example, "there are a lot of opportunities for people to slide down the social ladder". Two statements assessed perceptions of economic stability; U.K. r = .42, U.S. r = .49; for example, "Most people remain in the same social class their entire lives". All statements used a scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree.* For analyses we calculated participants' averages for all three directions.

Wealth stratification

We used a standard 4-question measure from the International Social Survey Programme (M. D. R. Evans et al., 1992) in which participants see five diagrams depicting types of societies, from 1 = "A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle, and the great mass of people at the bottom" to 5 = "Many people near the top and only a few near the bottom." Participants indicated which society is most like theirs today, theirs in the future, what their society should be like, and the society they would prefer to live in if they had no control over their social class group.

Analysis plan

First, we determined the social class groups with which participants identified. Then, we used linear mixed models with an unstructured repeated covariance matrix to explore multivariate mean differences between social class groups on identity (exploration, commitment, centrality, private regard), stereotypes (competence, warmth) about seven target groups, mobility perceptions (upward, downward, stability), and stratification perceptions (today, future, should be, prefer), and a generalized linear model to explore univariate mean differences on system justification.

For all analyses, we ran parallel models for the U.K. and U.S. samples. In all models, we tested the effect of participant social class while including SES (income, education), gender, race/ethnicity, and generational status as covariates. Income and education were never significant covariates in any models. The patterns for gender, race/ethnicity, and generational status were sporadic. Results regarding the role of social class are reported below, with reports of all significant covariates included in the Supplementary materials.

Missing data were rare. For lists of groups in society and self-categorizations, we analyzed social class groups that were listed by at least 10% of at least one sample; see Table 2. Across both samples, missing rates for individual items about identity, stereotypes, fairness, mobility, and stratification ranged from 0% to 1.1%.

For all models, likelihood ratio (LR) χ^2 tests are indices of model fit, assessed using ML estimation. RML estimation was used to interpret parameter estimates. Partial eta squared (η_p^2) and standardized regression coefficients (β) are indices of effect size. Standard errors (SEs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) are indices of point estimate precision. Follow-up comparisons were conducted with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Tables S4 (U.K.) and S5 (U.S.) in the Supplementary materials provide correlations among all study variables. Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS 28.

TABLE 2 Social class groups identified.

	In society		Own group membership original		Own group membership combined	
	U.K. sample	U.S. sample	U.K. sample	U.S. sample	U.K. sample	U.S. sample
Homeless	.04*	.12*	0	0		
Poor	.18*	.43*	.01*	.07*		
Lower class	.48	.51	.05	.05	.07*	.13*
Working class	.76*	.41*	.38*	.17*	.39*	.18*
Lower middle class	.14*	.23*	.04	.07		
Middle class	.85	.81	.45	.47	.51	.56
Upper middle class	.22*	.41*	.02*	.12*		
Upper class	.78*	.64*	.01	.01	.03*	.14*
Rich	.07*	.29*	.01	.01		
Elite	.15*	.20*	.01	.01		
One percent	.02*	.15*	0	0		
Nobility or royalty	.13*	.00*	0	0		

Note:

*column proportions differ at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

RQ1: social class as a group identity

Social class groups representations: In society

Both the U.K. and U.S. samples identified four main social class groups: *lower class*, *working class*, *middle class*, and *upper class*. Eight smaller groups were also listed in one or both samples: homeless, poor, lower middle class, upper middle class, rich, elite, one percent, and nobility or royalty; see Table 2.

    U.K. participants evidenced somewhat greater consensus, listing two of the common groups -working class and upper class- more frequently than U.S. participants; see Tables 2 and 3. An exception was nobility or royalty which appeared only in the U.K. sample. U.S. participants produced a somewhat wider range of groups, filling out the "bottom" (homeless, poor), "middle" (lower middle class, upper middle class), and "top" (rich, elite, one percent) of the social class hierarchy; see Table 2.

    As detailed in Table 3, both samples were especially likely to reference *money* when describing groups near the "bottom" (lower class in the U.K., poor in the U.S.) and the "top" (upper class, rich, and elite, plus upper middle class in the U.K. and one percent in the U.S.) of the social class hierarchy, for example, "just about making enough to pay the bills." Participants were especially likely to reference *rank* when describing "middle" (middle class) and "top" groups (upper middle class, plus upper class and nobility or royalty in the U.K. and elite in the U.S.), for example, "the top in society, like the royal family." Both samples were also especially likely to reference *work* when describing working class, for example, "working people, blue collar perhaps, people with trades and crafts who work for a living", and especially likely to reference *education* when describing middle class, for example, "went to university."

TABLE 3 Representations of social class groups in society.

U.K. sample

	Homeless	Poor	Lower class	Working class	Lower middle class	Middle class	Upper middle class	Upper class	Rich	Elite	One percent	Nobility or royalty	Overall
Money	.33	.51	.49*	.35*	.37	.34*	.52*	.48*	.47*	.46*	.40	.24*	.73[a]
Work	.06*	.43*	.38*	.63*	.49*	.49*	.51*	.22*	.33	.10*	.40	.07*	.70[a]
Education	0	.06*	.09	.15	.24	.17*	.18	.12	0	.04*	0	.08	.30[a]
Rank	0	.12	.05*	.11*	.19	.21*	.28*	.25*	.13	.15	.20	.46*	.47
Traits	.17	.20	.09	.18	.21	.11	.15	.17	.20	.13	.20	.05	.36
Norms	.67	.39	.40	.38	.49	.45	.46	.42	.47	.45	.30	.29	.71[a]

U.S. sample

	Homeless	Poor	Lower class	Working class	Lower middle class	Middle class	Upper middle class	Upper class	Rich	Elite	One percent	Nobility or royalty	Overall
Money	.32*	.58*	.59	.36*	.52*	.40*	.41*	.61*	.56*	.52*	.70*	n/a	.82[a]
Work	.13*	.19*	.27*	.59*	.38	.34*	.40*	.19*	.15*	.17*	.07	n/a	.59[a]
Education	.01*	.06*	.12	.09	.18*	.11*	.18*	.09	.04*	.05*	.03*	n/a	.25[a]
Rank	.08*	.10*	.15*	.11*	.19	.26*	.19*	.16*	.15*	.21*	.21	n/a	.48
Traits	.31*	.16*	.09	.13	.07*	.10*	.08*	.07*	.20*	.19*	.20	n/a	.35
Norms	.66	.54	.56	.45	.64*	.57*	.57	.44*	.49	.43	.34*	n/a	.79[a]

Note:

*column proportions within samples differ at $p < .05$.

[a]Row proportions across samples differ at $p < .05$.

Many responses received multiple codes; for example, one participant described working class in the following terms: "Hard working. Struggling to make ends meet. Short of money for luxuries. Not often higher educated. Honest for the most part. Polite and well mannered" (referencing money, education, traits, and norms). Likewise, referencing money, work, education, and norms, one participant described upper middle class as: "Privately educated, and it goes without saying that their children will also be privately educated. Live mostly in southeast England/London. Work in the professions and in big business, for example fintech, corporate law. Own several properties to rent out, possibly a holiday home abroad. Own several cars. Expect several holidays abroad a year. Travel first/business long-haul and take skiing holidays in Europe. Hire a nanny if decided to have kids to cope with both parents working long hour culture. Mostly liberal elite, not necessarily Tory voting as their parents probably were."

Social class group representations: own group memberships

Participants self-identified as members of nine different social class groups, but middle class and working class were most common in both samples; see Table 2. To test our questions about the role of social class group membership for identity and intergroup attitudes, it was necessary to combine small groups together; see Table 2. We combined poor and lower class into *lower class* (n = 28 U.K.; n = 62 U.S.), kept working class as *working class* (n = 158 U.K.; n = 87 U.S.), combined lower middle class and middle class into *middle class* (n = 205 U.K.; n = 278 U.S.), and combined upper middle class, upper class, rich, and elite into *upper class* (n = 14 U.K.; n = 70 U.S.) As detailed in the Supplementary materials, there were no confounds of social class group with demographics. In both samples, increases in group status (lower class → working class → middle class → upper class) were associated with increases in the average income, education, and SSS of participants in that group (see Supplementary materials).

U.K. participants again evidenced somewhat greater consensus, primarily identifying as middle class (51%) or working class (39%) with few lower class (7%) or upper class (3%); see Table 2. Relative to U.S. participants, U.K. participants were also more likely to identify as working class, and to reference work, for example, "I work in a factory and live paycheck to paycheck, my job is basically my life," and education, for example, "I have been highly educated;" see Table 4. U.S. participants again evidenced somewhat greater variability, primarily identifying as middle class (56%) but with working class (18%), upper class (14%), and lower class (13%) also represented; see Table 2. Relative to U.K. participants, U.S. participants were also more likely to identify as lower class or upper class, and to reference money, for example, "I don't earn as much money as I would like," and norms, for example, "I am lucky enough to live a good and luxurious life;" see Table 4.

Many responses received multiple codes; for example, one participant identified as poor because: "With the pandemic our family has struggled massively. Bills are piling up and there seems to be no way out. I'm constantly in fear that we're on the verge of homelessness" (referencing money and rank). Citing work, education, and norms, one participant identified as working class saying: "Father was a coal miner, mother was homemaker. I was the first of my family to get an education but still feel like I belong to the class I was raised." Explaining why they identified as middle class, one participant said: "Went to uni, own a house, have a professional career, but will never see the pensions that my parents had. I vote Green. I spend my free time going to concerts and art galleries. I read the broadsheets" (referencing education, work, money, and norms). Finally, one participant identified as upper middle class citing work, norms, and money: "I'm a white collar worker in middle management at a fortune 500 firm. Own two properties and travel

TABLE 4 Representations of own social class group membership.

U.K. Sample

	Lower class (7%, $n = 28$)	Working class (39%, $n = 158$)	Middle class (51%, $n = 205$)	Upper class (3%, $n = 14$)	Overall
Money	.54	.51	.46	.57	.49[a]
Work	.21*	.55*	.52*	.21*	.50[a]
Education	.14	.21	.32	.36	.26[a]
Rank	.11	.23	.27	.21	.25
Traits	.07	.12	.09	0	.09
Norms	.50	.49	.49	.43	.49[a]

U.S. sample

	Lower class (12%, $n = 62$)	Working class (18%, $n = 87$)	Middle class (56%, $n = 278$)	Upper class (14%, $n = 70$)	Overall
Money	.73	.52	.60	.61	.60[a]
Work	.27*	.56*	.26*	.32*	.33[a]
Education	.05*	.10*	.17*	.32*	.17[a]
Rank	.31	.24	.27	.17	.26
Traits	.11	.12	.03	.06	.06
Norms	.57	.69	.63	.61	.64[a]

Note:

*column proportions within samples differ at $p < .05$.

[a]Row proportions across samples differ at $p < .05$.

abroad at will. Have savings for the rest of my life if I lost my job. Live in a comfortable and nice suburb."

Social class identity

The model for the U.K. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(34) = 1109.34$, $p < .001$. On average, commitment was higher than private regard, which was higher than centrality, which was higher than exploration, all $ps < .01$, $F(3, 360) = 12.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, one identity dimension differed significantly across social class groups, $F(12, 397.79) = 6.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. As illustrated in Figure 1, increases in social class group status were associated with increases in the group's average reported private regard, all $ps < .05$, with the exception of upper class which did not differ significantly from working class or middle class, both $ps > .05$.

The model for the U.S. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(38) = 1899.56$, $p < .001$. On average, commitment was higher than private regard, which was higher than centrality and exploration, all $ps < .001$ except for exploration and centrality, which did not differ significantly, $F(3, 453) = 10.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 01$. However, one identity dimension differed significantly across social class groups, $F(12, 481.41) = 15.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 06$. As illustrated in Figure 1, increases in social class group status were associated with increases in the group's average reported private regard, all $ps < 01$.
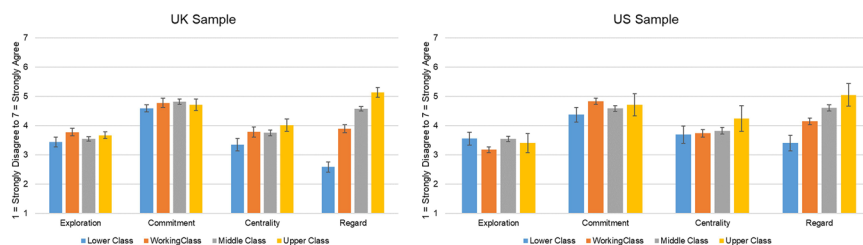
FIGURE 1 Social class identity.

Note: Bars represent standard errors. Lower, working, middle, and upper class are participants' social class group memberships.
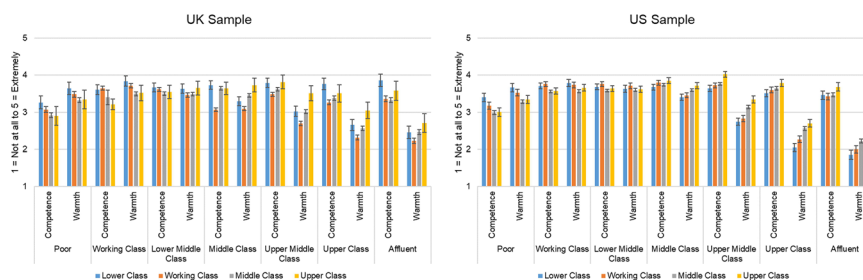

FIGURE 2 Social class stereotypes.

Note: Bars represent standard errors. Lower, working, middle, and upper class are participants' social class group memberships.

RQ1 summary

Overall, many participants in both samples perceived four main social class groups -lower class, working class, middle class, and upper class-, personally identified primarily as middle class or working class, and represented social class in both material (e.g., money) and social (e.g., norms) terms. There was more consensus in the U.K. and variability in the U.S. on both perceptions of groups in society and self-categorization. Across group memberships and in both samples, participants identified *with* their social class group (i.e., felt belonging, similarity, and meaning with their ingroup). Moreover, increases in private regard (i.e., feeling good, happy, and proud about one's social class) were generally associated with increases in the status of the group: lower class → working class → middle class → upper class.

RQ2: social class group identity and views on society

Social class stereotypes

The model for the U.K. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(114) = 1813.56$, $p < 001$. Overall, increases in target group status (poor → affluent) were associated with increases in competence stereotypes and decreases in warmth stereotypes, $F(13, 360) = 7.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. However, stereotypes also differed significantly across social class groups, $F(42, 360.93) = 3.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As illustrated in Figure 2, working class participants viewed working class people as more competent,
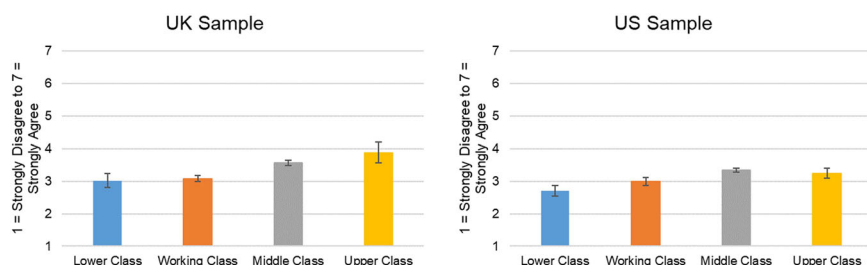
FIGURE 3 System justification beliefs.

Note: Bars represent standard errors. Lower, working, middle, and upper class are participants' social class group memberships.

$p = .005$, and warmer, $p = .04$, than did middle class participants, and middle class and upper class participants viewed middle class, upper middle class, and upper class people as more warm than did working class participants, all $ps < .01$. Additionally, lower class participants viewed upper class people as more competent than did working class participants, and viewed affluent people as more competent than did middle class participants, both $ps < .05$.

The model for the U.S. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(128) = 2636.44$, $p < 001$. Overall, increases in target group status (poor → affluent) were associated with increases in competence stereotypes and decreases in warmth stereotypes, $F(13, 453) = 15.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. However, stereotypes also differed significantly across social class groups, $F(42, 453.98) = 2.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As illustrated in Figure 2, lower class participants viewed poor people as more competent and more warm than did middle class participants, both $ps < .05$, and working class participants viewed working class people as more competent than did middle class participants, $p = .04$. Moreover, middle class and upper class participants viewed upper middle class and upper class people as more warm than did lower class and working class participants, all $ps < .01$, and middle class participants viewed affluent people as more warm than did lower class participants, $p = .04$. Finally, upper class participants viewed upper middle class people as more competent than did lower class, working class, or middle class participants, all $ps < .05$.

Societal fairness

The model for the U.K. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(10) = 41.67$, $p < .001$, and participants overall reported low to moderate system justification. However, beliefs differed significantly across social class groups, Wald $\chi^2(3) = 18.04$, $p < .001$. As illustrated in Figure 3, middle class participants reported higher system justification beliefs than working class participants, $p = .001$.

The model for the U.S. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(11) = 57.08$, $p < .001$, and participants overall reported low to moderate system justification. However, beliefs differed significantly across social class groups, Wald $\chi^2(3) = 15.35$, $p = .002$. As illustrated in Figure 3, middle class participants reported higher system justification beliefs than lower class participants, $p = .002$.

Economic mobility

The model for the U.K. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(26) = 792.78$, $p < .001$. Overall, both upward mobility and downward mobility were perceived as more likely than economic stability, both ps
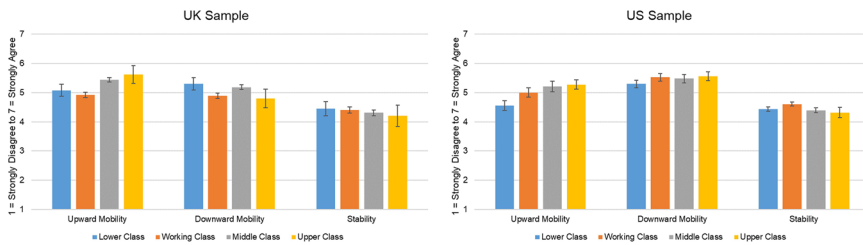
FIGURE 4 Economic mobility beliefs.

Note: Bars represent standard errors. Lower, working, middle, and upper class are participants' social class group memberships.
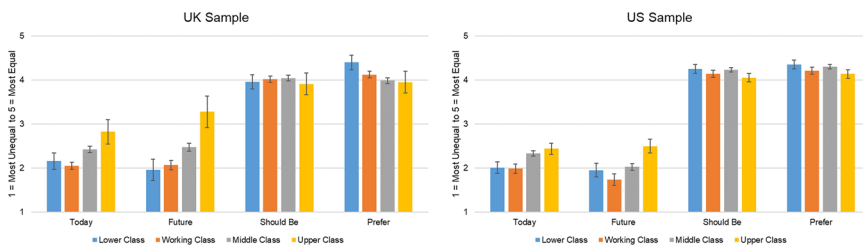

FIGURE 5 Wealth stratification perceptions

Note: Bars represent standard errors. Lower, working, middle, and upper class are participants' social class group memberships.

< 001, $F(2, 360) = 3.64$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. However, perceptions differed significantly across social class groups, $F(9, 362.16) = 3.05$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. As illustrated in Figure 4, middle class participants perceived upward mobility as more likely than did working class participants, $p < .001$.

The model for the U.S. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(29) = 1245.10$, $p < .001$. Overall, downward mobility was perceived as more likely than upward mobility which was perceived as more likely than economic stability, all $ps < .001$, $F(2, 453) = 7.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. However, perceptions differed significantly across social class groups, $F(9, 496.46) = 2.22$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. As illustrated in Figure 4, middle class and upper class participants perceived upward economic mobility as more likely than did lower class participants, both $ps < .01$.

Wealth stratification

The model for the U.K. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(34) = 865.15$, $p < .001$. Overall, participants perceived society as more unequal today and in the future than it should be or they preferred it to be, $F(3, 358.85) = 22.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. However, beliefs differed significantly across social class groups, $F(12, 364.30) = 3.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. As illustrated in Figure 5, middle class and upper class participants perceived society as more equal today, and predicted it would be more equal in the future, than did lower class and working class participants, all $ps < 05$.

The model for the U.S. sample was significant, LR $\chi^2(38) = 1285.51$, $p < .001$. Overall, participants perceived society as more unequal today and in the future than it should be ($M = 4.17$, $SE = .04$) or they preferred it to be, $F(3, 452.47) = 67.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. However, beliefs differed significantly across social class groups, $F(12, 470.12) = 2.37$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. As illustrated in Figure 5, middle class and upper class participants perceived society to be more equal today than did working class participants, both $ps < .05$, and upper class participants predicted society would be more equal in the future than did working class and middle class participants, both $ps < 05$.

RQ2 summary

Overall, in both samples, participants stereotyped their own social class ingroup less harshly on the dimension (either warmth or competence) on which it was generally negatively stereotyped. Also in both samples, in general participants who identified with higher-status social class groups reported stronger system justification, upward mobility beliefs, and perceptions of equal wealth distribution in the present and the future.

DISCUSSION

Guided by social identity theory (SIT), this study explored: (1) how people in the U.K. and the U.S. represented and identified with social class as a group identity and (2) the implications of this group membership for people's perceptions of social class and inequality in society. We explored these questions with diverse samples in the U.K. and the U.S. Overall, regarding RQ1, participants commonly perceived four main social class groups which they represented using both material (e.g., money) and social (e.g., norms) indicators of social class group membership, and many participants personally identified as working class or middle class. Beyond social categorization, people on average identified *with* their social class ingroup (e.g., felt they belonged), and people who identified with higher status social class groups felt more positively (e.g., proud) about their group identity. Moreover, regarding RQ2, group membership informed perceptions of society; participants stereotyped their own social class ingroup less harshly on dimensions (warmth or competence) where it was generally negatively stereotyped, and those who identified as middle class or upper class generally believed society was more fair and equal, and upward mobility more likely, than those who identified as lower class or working class. Together with other recent SIT-informed research in this area (e.g., Jetten et al., 2017; Manstead et al., 2020), these findings indicate that social class is a meaningful group identity with important practical implications for how people think and feel about themselves, others, and potential problems in their societies.

RQ1: social class as a group identity

Social class group representations and group memberships

From an SIT perspective, social categorization is the first step toward group identification. Participants in this study commonly perceived four main social class groups in the U.K. and the U.S.: lower class, working class, middle class, and upper class, as well as a range of smaller groups. Despite perceiving variability in society, however, most people personally identified as middle

class (45% U.K., 47% U.S.) or working class (38% U.K., 17% U.S.) A longstanding question concerns *why*, in such socioeconomically diverse samples and societies, so many people identify with these two social class groups (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Marsden et al., 2020). Our results clearly indicated that social class was correlated with, but not reducible to, SES (e.g., income, education). Rather, participants represented social class as a *group* identity, complete with assumptions about norms, traits, and relative rank in addition to money, education, and work, and with implications for their attitudes and beliefs that generally aligned with predictions from SIT.

Group identities provide a framework for understanding the social world through the lens of who "we" are. In this study, U.K. and U.S. participants distinguished between social class groups using multiple markers of group membership. Money was a stronger indicator of social class groups at the "bottom" and the "top" of the hierarchy, rank distinguished between "middle" and "top" groups, work was a key indicator for the working class, education marked the middle class, and all groups were associated with a plethora of social norms and lifestyle characteristics. Thus, different from other research that uses single indicators (e.g., income) as a proxy for social class group membership, this study demonstrated how participants' process of self-categorization entailed complex consideration of what "we" have (money, education), what "we" do (work), what "we" are like (norms, traits) and how "we" compare to other social class groups (rank).

Social class group identity

Moreover, going beyond social categorization, this study revealed how people identified *with* their social class ingroup, across group memberships and in both samples. This was particularly evident in people's reports of feeling that they understood, belonged, and felt similar to their social class ingroup (commitment) and experiencing emotions about their ingroup that clearly reflected awareness of a status hierarchy. Specifically, participants' private regard (i.e., feeling good, happy, and proud) toward their ingroup was higher among groups of higher status: lower class → working class → middle class → upper class. While prior studies suggested that people view potential contributors to social class (i.e., education, profession, income) as important to them (Easterbrook et al., 2020), this study illustrates *why* social class is a meaningful social group identity. Like other group identities, social class provides people with a sense of belonging and connection with ingroup members and (for some) positive feelings about one's ingroup's status in society.

RQ2: social class group identity and views on society

Stereotypes

Group membership had quite consistent implications for people's attitudes about social class and inequality in society. First, in both samples, people stereotyped their *own* social class ingroup less harshly on the dimension on which it was generally negatively stereotyped (Fiske, 2018). For example, working class participants viewed working class people as more competent (e.g., capable, intelligent, hardworking) than did participants from other groups, and upper class participants viewed upper class people as more warm (e.g., well-intentioned, friendly, welcoming) than did participants from other groups. From an SIT perspective this may reflect reframing whereby, when people know that their group is stigmatized in a domain (e.g., people think "we" are mean) they seek to reframe or redefine their group's value ("we" are not mean, "we" are kind). Fun-

damentally, these findings reflect people's motivation to feel positively about their social class (ingroup biases) even as they seek to explain the social world using group differences (stereotypes).

Societal fairness, economic mobility, and wealth stratification

Equally noteworthy and especially practically pertinent, in both samples, participants who identified as middle class and upper class were generally more likely than participants who identified as lower class or working class to believe that societal systems operated fairly, upward economic mobility was possible, and wealth was distributed equally today and in the future. From an SIT perspective, this reveals participants' perceptions of the fairness of status relationships and permeability of group boundaries. In short, people who identified with higher-status social class groups were generally more likely to think in ways that preserved their rank (society is fair and equal, upward mobility is possible, "our" status is earned).

Over time these assumptions held by members of higher-status social class groups, be they unintentional oversights or motivated manipulations of observed evidence, may contribute to further entrenchment of the status quo. That is, those who believe that everything is working as it should be may perceive little need for individual or societal change, including policy changes, that work toward greater equity. As other researchers in this area have likewise noted (e.g., Bullock, 2017; Liaquat et al., 2023), building cross-class support among these groups for redistributive policies that reduce economic inequalities will require addressing their underlying beliefs about how society currently works.

Context differences

Overall, as anticipated, there were more similarities than differences in results across the U.K. and U.S. samples. However, some important differences did emerge in the number of social class groups participants perceived and the relative frequency with which they referenced common concepts to describe them. U.K. participants evidenced somewhat greater consensus, listing common groups (working class and upper class), personally identifying as working class, and citing work and education as indices of group membership more often than U.S. participants. Yet, the U.K. sample was also unique in perceiving nobility or royalty as a social class group. By contrast, U.S. participants more commonly listed a wider range of social class groups (homeless, poor, lower middle class, upper middle class, rich, elite, one percent), personally identified as lower class and upper class, and cited money and norms as indices of group membership more often than U.K. participants.

The tendency to identify a consensus set of groups in the U.K. may reflect a more explicit national history of attention to social class, and the tendency to identify a number of groups in the U.S. speaks against the idea of a "classless" society (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Savage et al., 2013). Once groups were established, however, people in both contexts identified and identified *with* their ingroup, and the implications of group membership for intergroup attitudes and views on society were quite similar across contexts. One conclusion is that, although the relative number of groups differed, the psychological implications of social class group identification were similar in both contexts.

Limitations and future directions

This study was exploratory and the results are correlational; no causal claims can be drawn. Moreover, although there are some similarities in how people around the world think about social class, including perceptions that society should be more equal (Evans & Kelley, 2017), participants in this study were from two countries and the results may not generalize beyond the U.K. and the U.S. Finally, although participants reported wide SES variability and self-identified with a wide range of social class groups, a majority identified as working class or middle class. On the one hand, this constrains our conclusions about identity and attitudes among people from less commonly identified social class groups. On the other hand, this is very consistent with prior research drawing on nationally representative samples in the U.K. and the U.S., which finds a strong tendency to identify as working class and middle class in both contexts (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Marsden et al., 2020). In short, people's self-categorization into (mainly two) social class groups poses a methodological challenge but is also quite theoretically consistent with SIT.

We encourage continued investigation of social class from an SIT perspective. The results of this study suggest that people make ingroup/outgroup categorizations along social class lines that have implications for how they feel about themselves and their attitudes that preserve (or disrupt) the status quo. In line with other recent research drawing on SIT (Jetten et al., 2017; Manstead et al., 2020), the findings from this study highlight social class as an emotionally significant group identity with meaningful implications for how people think and feel about themselves, others, and society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES

This article has earned Open Materials badges. Materials is available at https://osf.io/26uyf/.

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