

ARTICLE

Advancing developmental intergroup perspectives on social class

Rashmita S. Mistry¹ | Laura Elenbaas² | Katherine M. Griffin¹ | Lindsey Nenadal³ | Asil Yassine¹¹University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA²University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, USA³California State University, Chico, Chico, California, USA

Correspondence

Rashmita S. Mistry, Department of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA.
Email: mistry@gseis.ucla.edu

Abstract

Recent research has contributed to developmental scientists' understanding of how children and adolescents reason about social class in relation to themselves, others, and their economic, social, and cultural world. To advance developmental intergroup perspectives on social class, in this article, we (1) *define* social class, (2) evaluate whether the evidence about social class *aligns* with key predictions from developmental intergroup theory (DIT) and social identity development theory (SIDT), (3) outline how complementary insights from DIT and SIDT can be *integrated* to describe and explain developing concepts of social class, and (4) highlight what is *unique* about social class and *additional considerations* important to the study of social class that developmental intergroup researchers need to consider. In each section, we emphasize strengths and limitations of the research and offers suggestions for ongoing research.

KEYWORDS

attribution theory, developmental intergroup theory, social class, social identity development theory

Globally, children and adolescents are growing up in societies marked by stark economic inequality. Along with a robust body of scholarship highlighting the importance of economic security for children's health and well-being, researchers are beginning to examine how children and adolescents think and feel about their own and others' economic circumstances or social class position (Ruck et al., 2019). Reflecting diverse theoretical traditions, recent studies have, for example, investigated social class identity (Destin, 2019), stereotypes about the rich and poor (Sigelman, 2012), moral concerns for distributive justice (Elenbaas et al., 2020), and action for community and social change (Diemer et al., 2020). To further advance and motivate developmental intergroup perspectives on social class, in this article, we (1) *define* social class, (2) evaluate whether evidence about social class *aligns* with predictions from developmental intergroup theory (DIT) and social identity development theory (SIDT), (3) demonstrate how complementary insights

from these perspectives can be *integrated* to advance research on social class, and (4) highlight what is *unique* about the study of social class from a developmental intergroup perspective.

SOCIAL CLASS AS A UNIFYING TERM

We recommend using *social class* as a unifying and encompassing term that positions social class as a social group and an identity that derives its meaning through everyday experiences and interactions, with related consequences for individuals' thoughts, affect, motivations, and behaviors. This is consistent with social psychological perspectives that describe social class 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.,

Abbreviations: DIT, developmental intergroup theory; SES, socioeconomic status; SIDT, social identity development theory.

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2012, p. 546), including the “subjective understanding, meaning, and value that people attach to their SES (socioeconomic status) from moment to moment interactions in real time” (Destin, 2017, p. 271). In other words, the concept of social class includes material resources (e.g., income, wealth) that reflect purchasing power and access to social capital (e.g., opportunities, networks) and other forms of influence, construals of group rank or status (e.g., higher, lower), and the social meaning attached to group membership (e.g., values, norms, practices, preferences; Diemer et al., 2013). Using the term social class also aligns evidence from developmental science with research in sociology, education, and other fields.

SOCIAL CLASS AND DEVELOPMENTAL INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVES

Research drawing on two well-established intergroup perspectives—DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007) and SIDT (Nesdale, 2004)—has focused primarily on stereotypes and prejudice about gender, race, and minimal groups (established in an experimental context, e.g., the “blue group” and the “green group”). As a social group, social class is newer to the developmental intergroup literature. Both DIT and SIDT start with the idea of social categorization. According to DIT, children sort people into social categories as a way of understanding and making predictions about them. According to SIDT, children sort people into groups of “us” and “them,” and seek to belong to relevant ingroups. The two theories differ in their relative emphasis on cognitive versus affective processes, but both acknowledge a key role for environmental influence. DIT highlights the environmental cues children use to form social categories and the subsequent cognitive processes that lead to the development of stereotypes, while SIDT highlights the affective processes that lead to the development of ingroup favoritism and the environmental cues that generate prejudice. Together, they address how the activation of knowledge structures about social groups (DIT) and the pull of ingroup bonds (SIDT) are routes to developing prejudice and endorsing stereotypes. Both theories share the proposition that these psychological processes are the roots of behavior, and that understanding them is key to eliminating the discrimination that allows unjust social hierarchies to persist.

Before evaluating key predictions from DIT and SIDT with respect to social class, it is important to consider that much of the developmental research in this area has been conducted in the U.S. context, and within this context, most studies have examined middle- or upper-middle class participants’ perspectives and experiences. Children from poor, working class, and affluent backgrounds are underrepresented, and White

children are overrepresented relative to children of color (Quint et al., 2018; Rogers, 2019; Ruck et al., 2019). This is problematic because the cognitive and affective underpinnings of developing views on social class do not appear to—and would not be predicted to—operate identically across children and adolescents from different social classes or sociocultural backgrounds, leaving key predictions from both DIT and SIDT untested. Going forward, researchers should include diverse and representative samples, both within and outside of the United States. This may require additional resources and differentiated or more intense and targeted recruitment efforts, but we must ensure that this research is informed by and applicable to a majority of the world’s young people (Brown et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2016).

Social class and DIT

According to DIT, children seek to sort people into social categories as part of understanding their social world (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Children are likely to form social categories for groups that are perceptually distinguishable, different in size, labeled by others, and socially meaningful in their environment. Once social categories are established, children are likely to view members as sharing other important properties (e.g., preferences, behaviors). In an interactive process, children are motivated to detect and explain distinctions in social categories, the environment often offers implicit or explicit stereotypic explanations, and children’s beliefs about social categories strengthen as they use stereotypes to make inferences about others. This leads to three initial propositions about social class.

Social class is perceptually salient and distinguishable to children but follows a slower developmental timeline than other social categories. Children between 5 and 8 years sort people by social class based primarily on observations of their material possessions and lifestyle (e.g., toys, homes; Heberle et al., 2018; Mistry et al., 2016). By late childhood and early adolescence, cues to social class can be contextually specific (e.g., clothing brands, neighborhood markers), and typically include notions of opportunity (e.g., activities, leisure travel) along with material resources (Elenbaas, 2019; Mistry et al., 2015). Cues about social class can be hidden or enhanced, but once the boundaries of category membership are established, adults are quick to detect social class differences in dress, activities, preferences, and speech (Kraus et al., 2017). Furthermore, in countries where social class, race, and ethnicity are related causally—such as during and after state-sanctioned Apartheid policies in South Africa—children as young as 5 years show awareness of these associations (see Olson et al., 2012; see also Additional Considerations section).

Children detect and use category labels for social class. By 4–5 years, children recognize and use the labels *rich* and *poor* (Ahl et al., 2019). Adolescents use and identify a range of social class labels, including *working class* and *super rich* (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019). Although the use of specific labels may vary across contexts (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014), children, adolescents, and adults use labels to mark social class consistently and systematically.

Children form stereotypes about others based on their social class. Young children (ages 4–6 years) hold some stereotypes about peers depicted as rich or poor (e.g., academically competent, generous, dirty, lazy; Ahl et al., 2019; Shutts et al., 2016). By late childhood, these assumptions become more specific and differentiated. Older children (ages 10–12 years) typically associate people described as middle class with positive traits (e.g., polite, friendly; Mistry et al., 2015), individuals described as poor with mostly negative and some positive traits (e.g., not smart, but kind), and people described as rich with a mix of positive and negative traits (e.g., intelligent, but also snobby; Mistry et al., 2015; Sigelman, 2012).

Most developmental studies have focused on stereotypes about the rich and the poor. Omitting other social class groups (e.g., the working class, middle class, very affluent) risks drawing incomplete or incorrect conclusions about children's developing beliefs about social class. Researchers should investigate beliefs about groups beyond rich and poor; deciding which groups to include should be determined contextually because the meaning and interpretation of social class groups are socioculturally embedded and constructed.

Social class and SIDT

According to SIDT, once social groups are established, children are motivated to belong to and benefit their ingroup. The environment often offers opportunities to do so by, for instance, befriending and sharing with ingroup members. When possible, children are motivated to identify with social groups that are seen as positively distinct (i.e., different from other groups in a good way, the “best” group to belong to). Children are more likely to develop outgroup prejudice when their ingroup is considered higher status in the context, they sense that their ingroup is threatened, or ingroup norms condone discrimination. This leads to three initial propositions about social class.

Children can identify with their social class ingroup, with relative accuracy in identification increasing across development, at least with respect to material resources. As children move from late childhood (Mistry et al., 2015) to late adolescence (Goodman et al., 2015), their perceptions of subjective social status are increasingly aligned with parents' reports of SES. However, we know little about the extent to which children identify *with* (i.e., feel that they belong to) their social class ingroup.

Children seek to identify with positively distinct social class groups. Notions of which group is the “best” one to belong to change across development and context as older children and adolescents incorporate notions of power, influence, respect, and esteem into their concepts of social class. In the United States, young children tend to identify as high in subjective social status (when defined as a combination of wealth and social influence; Mandalaywala et al., 2020). However, older children and early adolescents across diverse SES backgrounds often identify their family's socioeconomic position as *in the middle*, and use terms such as *regular* or *normal* to describe their status (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Mistry et al., 2015). U.S. adults also tend to identify as middle class more often than would be expected based on actual SES distribution (Evans & Kelley, 2004; but see Kochhar & Morin, 2014, for evidence of a declining trend). However, there is no evidence that young people, regardless of SES, overidentify as poor. This suggests variability in the extent to which children and adolescents seek to be (or to be perceived as) middle class or rich, but being poor is not considered a desirable status in U.S. society (this is perhaps not surprising given that poverty is a heavily stigmatized condition in the United States; Davis & Williams, 2020). The extent to which the pull toward the middle is uniquely American or more generalizable cross-nationally remains a question for research.

Children in higher-status social class groups show greater ingroup preference. Specifically, 4- to 6-year-olds from middle- and higher-SES households report greater liking for peers depicted as wealthy than as poor, while children from lower-SES households show more mixed preferences for ingroup or outgroup members (Shutts et al., 2016). By early adolescence, youth in socioeconomically diverse schools have twice as many friends of the same social class as they do friends of different social classes (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019). Few studies have tested the conditions that SIDT would predict as eliciting outgroup prejudice. However, evidence suggests that early adolescents who self-identify as higher in subjective social status find excluding a peer based on social class to be less wrong than those who self-identify as lower in subjective social status (Burkholder et al., 2020). Moreover, children from lower-SES households report feeling socially isolated from and excluded by peers (Quint et al., 2018). In contrast, in experimental studies where resources (e.g., toys) were limited, children and adolescents of diverse SES backgrounds tended to forego potential ingroup benefits and distributed more resources to peers depicted as poor (Elenbaas, 2019), in line with moral concerns for equity.

Although children's attitudes about social class have been correlated with their families' SES, social class is contextually (and developmentally) situated and contains complex notions of value, worth, and belonging

that are not easily reducible to indicators of SES. Thus, researchers should directly assess children's social class group identification and affiliation, as well as associations with attitudes and behaviors.

INTEGRATING INSIGHTS FROM DIT AND SIDT TO UNDERSTAND DEVELOPING VIEWS ON SOCIAL CLASS

Many aspects of children's and adolescents' reasoning about social class align with established predictions from DIT and SIDT. However, the evidence also highlights a need for greater integration of complementary predictions from both theories to describe and explain developing concepts of social class more precisely. One area in which these theories must be integrated is the role of social class group *status*.

For example, SIDT proposes that children seek to belong to groups seen as positively distinct. But how do they determine which groups are looked upon favorably by the broader society? DIT suggests a variety of environmental cues (e.g., group salience, treatment of group members) that children could use to form abstract notions of which social class groups are the "best" ones to belong to. In fact, the stereotype formation processes highlighted by DIT may help explain the developmental shift observed among many U.S. children from personally identifying as high status in early childhood (Mandalaywala et al., 2020) to identifying as middle class in late childhood and early adolescence (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Mistry et al., 2015). As noted earlier, young children tend to hold globally positive assumptions about the rich, but older children and adolescents may notice that, unlike the rich (and the poor), others perceive the middle class in a more consistently positive light (e.g., friendly, hardworking). As a result, they may, in turn, see themselves as more similar to and more likely to belong with this group that often receives respect (and rarely receives disdain or suspicion) from others. Such messages may be further reinforced by media representations and parents' socialization of the middle class as the normative and preferred status, either explicitly (e.g., "We're just like everyone else," "We're middle class"), or implicitly (e.g., references to others' social class status as better or worse off).

As another example, DIT proposes that stereotypes are available to all children. But some evidence suggests that, among older children and early adolescents attending socioeconomically diverse schools, those who see themselves as lower in subjective social status are more likely to attribute negative traits to people depicted as poor (Mistry et al., 2015) and those from higher-SES households are more likely to attribute negative traits to people depicted as rich (Elenbaas & Killen, 2019). What

accounts for this relative difference? SIDT suggests that children seeking to be (or to be seen as) members of the more desirable middle-class group would be especially motivated to reject and distance themselves from the norms of perceived outgroups (Abrams & Rutland, 2008)—in this case, the rich (e.g., selfish) or poor (e.g., lazy).

As these examples suggest, resources (e.g., wealth, income), social capital (e.g., access to opportunities), rank (e.g., higher, lower), and the meaning of social class group membership (e.g., values, practices, preferences) are all interrelated, but meaning may undergo the most dramatic developmental changes. Making meaning of social class involves developing culturally embedded psychological representations of what the members of different social class groups are like (e.g., responsible, greedy, friendly, lazy, hardworking), how different social class groups are valued in society (e.g., respected, denigrated, admired, rejected), and the implications for one's own social class identity (e.g., whether it confers public or private acknowledgment of worth, whether one should strive to change group memberships). Understanding how notions of relative status play into developing views on social class requires integrating insights about cognitive and affective processes across DIT and SIDT.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT SOCIAL CLASS FROM AN INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVE

The emerging developmental evidence not only highlights areas where complementary predictions from established theories can be integrated, but also reveals unique features of social class as a social category that developmental intergroup researchers need to consider. Many children (and adults) believe that it is within an individual's control to change their membership in a social class group. This assumption does not typically apply to other social groups, such as gender or race. Indeed, neither DIT nor SIDT research has usually asked how people *become* a member of their social category, but this is a key part of children's reasoning about social class.

Drawing on attribution theory (Zucker & Weiner, 1993), developmental researchers have investigated children's and adolescents' causal reasoning about why people are rich or poor. While children younger than age 6 typically struggle to explain the causes of wealth and poverty, older children and adolescents cite individualistic (e.g., effort, ability), structural/societal (e.g., discrimination in hiring, lack of well-paying jobs), and fatalistic (e.g., bad luck, family inheritance) factors (Mistry et al., 2012; Sigelman, 2012). In U.S. studies, adolescents are more likely than children to generate explanations that involve societal systems

(Flanagan et al., 2014), but typically, both children and adolescents tend to endorse individualistic explanations over others (Mistry et al., 2012; Sigelman, 2012). By the same token, children as young as age 7 believe that people can change their social class position through hard work and education (Mistry et al., 2016). Research with novel groups established in experimental contexts (e.g., the “Blarks” and the “Orps”) also points to an early emerging tendency to assume that between-group disparities have internal rather than external causes (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015).

In one study, adolescents from lower-SES households endorsed stronger beliefs about meritocracy than their higher-SES peers, a finding that suggests a need for some youth to maintain a stronger sense of agency in their path toward mobility as they learn about structural inequalities (Flanagan, 2013). These findings and interpretations are couched in a U.S. context, and the United States is a country marked by high economic inequality, a dominant narrative of meritocracy (Jost et al., 2015), and chastisement of the poor (Davis & Williams, 2020). It remains to be seen if these results hold under different sociopolitical and economic conditions.

Maintaining beliefs that group membership in a social class is within an individual's control may provide a powerful perceived justification for the social class stereotypes and prejudice observed in research drawing on DIT and SIDT. For example, believing that people *become* poor because they lack motivation or responsibility implies that poor people *are* lazy and irresponsible and should be disliked because they *chose* this group membership despite many opportunities to move up the economic ladder. Similarly, believing that people *become* middle class by trying hard and playing by the rules implies that middle-class people *are* hardworking and honest and should be liked because they *earned* their group membership through means available to all. Finally, children's ambivalent attitudes toward the rich may reflect a mix of explanations for their status: Some people *become* rich through their exceptional intelligence or ingenuity, others by cheating or exploiting others, and still others through sheer luck (e.g., being born into a wealthy family).

It is well within the bounds of developmental intergroup perspectives to assess children's developing beliefs about changing social class group memberships. For instance, along with common questions such as “How many poor/middle-class/rich people are [trait, e.g., happy, sad]?” or “What does it mean to be poor/middle class/rich?” researchers should ask questions such as “How do people become poor/middle class/rich?” and “Have they always been/Will they always be poor/middle class/rich?”

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ADVANCING DEVELOPMENTAL INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS

Because social class is an important part of how children and adolescents think and feel about themselves and others, it should be part of the broader landscape of developmental intergroup research, including considering its intersection with other social identities. Recent work adopting an intersectional lens to examine gender and race has challenged typical approaches to early social categorization that emphasize one group at a time (Lei & Rhodes, 2021) and demonstrated how children's developing gender and racial identities are tightly intertwined (Rogers & Way, 2019). In the same way, an intersectional lens is important for addressing how the development of social class, race, and gender identity intersects in qualitatively different and possibly unique ways to inform young people's sense of self and others.

In the United States, developmental processes informing children and youth's social class identities may differ in important and meaningful ways across racial groups. In a recent U.S. study, racially and ethnically diverse early adolescents perceived White peers to be wealthier than Asian peers, and Asian peers to be wealthier than Black and Latinx peers (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019). Intersectional perspectives are also an important part of considering when and how children and adolescents develop an awareness of larger systems of privilege and oppression (Santos & Toomey, 2018). Research on critical consciousness has demonstrated how youth of color and youth experiencing poverty and economic adversity learn to critically evaluate social systems, with implications for their emotional and academic adjustment (Diemer et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the ultimate goal of much of the research on social class from developmental intergroup perspectives is to reduce classism and prepare children and youth to move toward action for economic justice. Given this context, we have sought in this article to advance both basic and applied research by synthesizing evidence across previously disparate areas. In doing so, we have highlighted how the study of developing social class beliefs and attitudes provides an opportunity for cross-theoretical integration and raised new questions about how children experience and reason about their social world.

ORCID

Rashmita S. Mistry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2106-1227>

Laura Elenbaas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4921-251X>

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