

**Cultural Expressions of Social Class and Their Implications for Group-Related  
Beliefs and Behaviors**

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### Abstract

In the wake of the Great Recession, rising inequality has increased social class disparities between people in society. In this research, we examine how differences in social class shape unique patterns of cultural expression, and how these cultural expressions affirm ingroup beliefs. In Study 1 ( $N=113$ ), we provide evidence that cultural expressions of social class on an online social network can signal the social class of targets: by simply viewing the cultural practices of individuals captured in uploaded Facebook photographs, individuals express their social class in ways that allow it to be perceived by strangers at levels that are above chance accuracy. In Study 2 ( $N=78$ ), we provide evidence that individuals express their own ingroup space differently based on social class: Class-specific cultural practices (including interests in education, arts, newspapers, TV, and shopping) have implications for ingroup-related beliefs and political organizing. Individuals who reported being lower in subjective social class, relative to those reporting higher subjective social class, show cultural practices that relate to recognizing the ingroup's relative lack of control (lower group efficacy) and, in turn, a tendency to remain politically inactive when faced with an ingroup-related social disadvantage. In sum, our research provides evidence suggesting that expressions of culture derived from one's social class have the capacity to create and maintain social class boundaries between individuals. Practical and political implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* Social class, cultural symbols, cultural practices, group efficacy, inaction

## Cultural Expressions of Social Class and Their Implications for Group-Related Beliefs and Behaviors

Social class is a powerful force that shapes the social lives of individuals: People live in neighborhoods, form close relationships and raise children, attend schools, and engage in leisure or work activities with individuals who share similar class backgrounds (DiMaggio, 2012; Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013; Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). Researchers across the social sciences have argued that these class divisions have the capacity, over time, to shape and affirm different norms, values, and expectations for the social selves of individuals—leading to observed cultural differences between those from different socioeconomic circumstances (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Jury et al., 2017; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011; Lott & Bullock, 2001; Markus, 2017; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). In the wake of the Great Recession, rising social and economic inequality has widened these class divisions between the haves and have-nots in society and increased the relevance and potential applications of research that examines the ways in which people perceive and respond to social class (Moya & Fiske, 2017).

In this research, we examine the possibility that class-related cultural practices, in and of themselves, have the capacity to create class divisions between people from different places on the social class hierarchy. We first introduce theory and evidence suggesting that individuals create their social spaces based on their own class-consistent cultural practices and that these spaces express class-consistent belief systems. We then test whether cultural symbols of social class define social spaces in ways that allow for the accurate perception of social class by outside observers. Finally, we examine the relationship between class-consistent cultural expressions and ingroup-related beliefs and behaviors that may foster class

divisions.

### **How Do Individuals from Different Social Classes Create their Social Spaces?**

Social class is expressed via cultural symbols and cultural practices. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that each individual develops a unique *habitus* in early childhood, which comprises habits of the mind, dispositions to action, and evaluation orientations (Bourdieu, 1979/84, 1985). Habitus is communicated and expressed via social spaces: the language that individuals use, their body posture, hobbies, outfits, tastes, and lifestyle preferences in general. Thus, individuals from different social classes create class-specific social spaces by exhibiting different lifestyles that reflect their position on society's social ladder. Different lifestyles are due to different levels of social, economic, and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, these lifestyle preferences are strongly determined by the individual's social class background and are thus an embodied and internalized expression of inequality.

One implication of this research on habitus and lifestyle preferences is that the behaviors of members of a particular social class have both cultural meaning and function. To the extent that class-relevant behaviors are expressed in public view, they can serve as tools to define social spaces and mark individuals as superior or subordinate in society. Empirical research shows that social class is indeed related to eating preferences (e.g., Tomlinson, 2003), the music people listen to (Snibbe & Markus, 2005), the schools people attend, and leisure activities they engage in (Domhoff, 1998; Tomlinson, 2003). Moreover, research shows that individuals engage in public behaviors that allow others to accurately discern their social class. For instance, during initial interaction between strangers, people from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, measured with self-reports of income and educational attainment, are more likely to express engagement cues (e.g., head nods, eye contact with their partner), whereas higher SES

individuals are more likely to express nonverbal cues of disinterest (e.g., doodling, directing their attention away from the partner, Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Moreover, based on these behavioral tendencies, naïve observers can accurately estimate the social class of participants, based on viewing only 60s of the recorded interactions (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

In the present work, we build on this prior work by moving beyond behaviors in a getting-acquainted situation to the systematic assessment of the ways in which individuals define their own social spaces within an online social networking website (i.e., Facebook.com). This setting goes beyond first impressions to established friendships. Again, we predict that people, perhaps automatically or without conscious awareness, use virtual spaces to express their social class, and by implication, online behaviors can be used to accurately signal social class to others. Before we present this study, we turn to a question that directly builds on the creation of class-specific social spaces, namely, whether the cultural practices that build these spaces not only signal to others (Study 1) but also affirm ingroup beliefs and attitudes (Study 2).

### **How Do People from Different Social Classes Perceive their Ingroup Space?**

In this section, we review literature indicating that the extent to which individuals express cultural behaviors consistent with their social class is associated with predictable class-based ingroup attitudes. We argue that the tendency for people to endorse class-specific cultural practices will predict ingroup beliefs about group efficacy, such that the extent to which lower SES individuals endorse class-specific cultural practices should account for their reduced levels of perceived group efficacy and political participation.

Several lines of evidence support this hypothesis that the cultural separation of social classes elicits differences in group norms and behaviors. First, individuals from different social

classes live in unequal environments, often sorted according to household income. Compared to high-SES individuals, low-SES individuals are more often exposed to situations and environments in which they lack personal freedom, social and economic power, and control (Domhoff, 1998). Frequent experiences of powerlessness can lead to a generalized perception of lacking control and of being dependent on others (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). It is, thus, not surprising that several studies find that those from relatively low-SES backgrounds report lower feelings of personal control and self-efficacy across a variety of domains, in comparison to their high-SES counterparts (see also Fernández-Ballesteros, Nicolás, Caprara, Barbaranelli & Bandura, 2002; Fritsche et al., 2017). For instance, measures of personal control show consistent negative associations with social class measured in terms of subjective ratings or objective indicators such as education, income, and occupational status (Kraus, Piff & Keltner, 2009; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt & Keltner, 2012; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Other research finds that those with lower educational attainment express less personally agentic self-concepts, characterized by a reduced emphasis on personal influence, autonomy, and choice and an increase in communal and other-oriented patterns of social relations (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus & Townsend, 2007).

Together, the above evidence indicates that relatively low-SES individuals feel that they have less individual influence over their social lives and outcomes in comparison to their high-SES counterparts. In the present research, we extend this individually focused work to the realm of group-based perceptions of efficacy by testing the assertion that the defining features of class-specific social spaces (i.e., cultural practices and norms) are related to, and perhaps reinforce, not only beliefs about individuals but also beliefs about one's ingroup (here, one's social class group). One such belief is that if my group is lower on the social ladder, then we

will be less effective in getting what we need, compared with groups further up on the social ladder. Past research shows that group efficacy is a key predictor of collective action (van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer & Leach, 2004). That is, individuals are motivated to participate in a political demonstration when they believe their ingroup is able to address its grievances. In contrast, when individuals do not perceive their ingroup to be effective in addressing desired changes, individuals are unwilling to engage in normative political activities to challenge the ingroup's disadvantage. Perceptions of efficacy may be informed by cultural practices, in and of themselves. We argue that class-specific spaces communicate norms and beliefs about the in-group that can preclude collective action. This is of particular interest, because although low-SES individuals protest under certain conditions (e.g., Bullock, Limbert, & Downing, 2013; Piven & Cloward, 1971), they often do not initiate protest against inequality (Solt, 2008).

Moreover, we assert that the degree to which individuals are embedded in class-relevant cultural practices should explain this pattern of group efficacy. More specifically, we predict that the more individuals subscribe to norms, values, and expectations that define their social class, the more low-SES individuals will feel that their group is low in perceived group efficacy and the more likely they will remain politically inactive. Thus, in the present research, we go beyond prior work by examining the relationship between social class cultural practices and *ingroup-related* beliefs and behaviors. This is important, because it can help to further our understanding of why low-SES individuals often remain politically inactive despite facing high levels of social disadvantage (e.g., Solt, 2008).

### **Goals of the Present Research**

The goal of this paper is two-fold: First, we aim to determine whether cultural symbols

and practices of social class are perceived by observers at levels that are above chance accuracy (here, in an online community: i.e., Facebook photographs; see also Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). Second, we empirically examine whether holding class-consistent cultural norms correlates with ingroup-related beliefs and behaviors that may foster class divisions. Specifically, we test whether class-specific cultural practices among relatively low-SES individuals predict perceptions of lower group efficacy and the tendency to remain politically inactive.

## Study 1

### Method

**Overview.** In Study 1, a sample of participants gave consent for our research team to download pictures from their personal profiles on Facebook.com. We downloaded the first ten profile photos most recently uploaded by participants. Subsequently, a separate sample of naïve observers viewed the photographs and attempted to guess the social class of participants based solely on this information.

**Participants.** We recruited a total of 113 participants, including 37 adults recruited through Mechanical Turk and 76 students from a public West Coast university. Each of these participants provided self-report measures of their own social class and provided us with access to their personal profile on Facebook.com. Demographic characteristics for the sample can be found in Table 1.

**Procedure and measures.** Participants were first instructed to fill out online questions assessing their own social class background and other demographic characteristics. These measures included educational attainment for the participant and his or her parents using a four-point scale: (1) did not finish high school, (2) high school graduation or equivalent, (3)

college graduate, (4) post-graduate degree ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Current household income ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 2.46$ ) and past household income (i.e., while growing up;  $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) were both assessed on eight-point scales (1)  $< \$15,000$ , (2)  $\$15,001-\$25,000$ , (3)  $\$25,001-\$35,000$ , (4)  $\$35,001-\$50,000$ , (5)  $\$50,001-\$75,000$ , (6)  $\$75,001-\$100,000$ , (7)  $\$100,001-\$150,000$ , and (8)  $> \$150,001$ , based on scales used in prior research (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). We observed the following distributions of participants according to current household income brackets: 1 = 16.4%, 2 = 9.1%, 3 = 4.5%, 4 = 6.4%, 5 = 11.8%, 6 = 20.0%, 7 = 14.5%, 8 = 17.3% and past household income brackets: 1 = 8.2%, 2 = 4.5%, 3 = 6.4%, 4 = 12.7%, 5 = 22.7%, 6 = 15.5%, 7 = 14.5%, 8 = 15.5%. Participants also rated their perceived social class using Adler and colleagues' (2000) measure of subjective socioeconomic status—participants ranked themselves on a ladder with 10-rungs representing ascending levels of income, education, and occupation status in society ( $M = 6.44$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ).

Following these demographic ratings, participants allowed the research team access to their Facebook.com profiles. One member of the research team sent a “friend request” to the participant allowing access to profile photographs. The participant then granted access to the research team member, who then downloaded up to ten of the most recent profile photos uploaded on Facebook.com by the participant. Participants who had uploaded fewer than ten profile photos ( $M = 8.96$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ) were still included in the sample. Photographs depicted study participants in a variety of social settings that included, for example: posing with friends, having fun at social gatherings, traveling or vacationing, and eating or drinking. Up to 40 additional written and photograph posts were downloaded for each participant, but were not used in the present analysis. The research team member subsequently terminated access to the profile after these entries were downloaded.

Just as in prior research on social class signaling in brief getting-acquainted interactions (Kraus & Keltner, 2009), the Facebook profile photos for each participant were then shown to a separate sample of nine naïve observers who used the same 10-step subjective social class ladder ranking to guess the social class of each participant ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), based solely on the 10 or fewer photographs taken from their Facebook.com profiles. Observers made ratings based on the set of photos for each participant. Ratings made by each of the nine observers showed high consistency across the rating of perceived social class ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and were thus averaged to create a composite score for each participant.

We also assessed other perceptions based on the photographs for psychological characteristics that may be confounded with social class. Specifically, observers rated the extent that participants appeared competent ( $M = 4.59$ ;  $SD = .64$ ) and physically attractive ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) all on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*), again based on a set of up to 10 photos. We found high consistency across the nine observers for ratings of competence ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and physical attractiveness ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and thus averaged the ratings of all observers to create a composite score for each variable. Both competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and physical attractiveness (Belmi & Neale, 2014) are used in perceiver estimates of social standing, and we sought to determine if these physical cues might signal social class in our sample of Facebook user photographs.

## **Results and Discussion**

Our central hypothesis is that behaviors on social media platforms will signal the social class of individuals to others at levels that are above chance accuracy. This means that there should be a positive correlation between participant social class self-reports and estimates from naïve observers. The correlations for the entire sample, the online participants, and the student

participants are reported in Table 2.

In the analysis of the entire sample, observer estimates were significantly positively correlated with mother's and father's education, early and current household income, and subjective social class. (Observer ratings of social class were uncorrelated with participant education attainment in the overall sample).

Subgroup analyses overlap to some extent, though also reflect the limited variance in educational attainment among student participants. When examining just the online participants, significant positive correlations with observer estimates emerged for own educational attainment and subjective social class ranking (with non-significant correlations for mother's and father's educational attainment, and early and current household income). For the student participant analysis, a marginally significant positive correlation emerged for mother's education, and significant positive correlations emerged for father's education and current and early household income. (Own education and subjective social class were not significantly associated with observer perceptions. That these correlations did not emerge in the student sample makes conceptual sense because the student sample participants are still pursuing their education and currently have not yet sorted into their enduring social class position in society.)

Overall, these results indicate that by simply viewing the cultural practices of individuals captured in uploaded Facebook photographs, individuals express their social class in ways that allow it to be perceived by strangers at levels that are above chance accuracy. To further explore the robustness of these associations and the potential use of other cues of social status in making these class estimates, we probed whether accurate perceptions of social class by observers were explained by the perceived competence or physical attractiveness of participants within the Facebook photographs. We examined linear regression analyses of

observer perceived social class, perceived competence, and perceived physical attractiveness predicting a composite score created by averaging all the standardized self-report indices of social class ( $\alpha = .71$ ). The analysis yielded a significant positive association of observer perceived social class on self-rated participant social class  $B = .37$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t = 2.63$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI = [.09, .64]. Neither perceived competence,  $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t = -0.63$ ,  $p = .53$ , 95% CI = [-.37, .19] nor perceived physical attractiveness,  $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = -1.40$ ,  $p = .17$ , 95% CI = [-.23, .04], accounted for observer ratings of social class. Thus, signals of social class may be independent of these other perceptions related to the attainment of social status in society.

## Study 2

Study 1 revealed that people create class-specific social spaces by expressing their social class in their behaviors. These class signals were perceived by others as indicated by a positive correlation between participant social class self-reports and estimates from naïve observers. Study 2 extends Study 1 by measuring cultural practices that create class-specific social spaces and by determining the relationship of these practices to ingroup-related beliefs and behaviors. Specifically, we examined whether cultural practices have implications for thoughts about whether one's own group is effective in getting what it needs and how these beliefs, in turn, have implications for political organizing. As a first step, we assessed cultural practices in people's everyday lives including: TV consumption, shopping habits, and interest in education, arts, and news information. Next, we tested a causal model: we expected that people's subjective social class background predicts their individual cultural practices, and that these cultural practices in turn predict group efficacy and the tendency to remain politically inactive.

## Method

**Participants.** Our sample included 83 individuals currently living in Germany. Three

participants were excluded because they did not indicate their social class, and two more participants were excluded because they did not complete the primary measures. Thus, the final sample consisted of  $N = 78$  participants (56% female), of which 82% were German, 10% were Swiss, and the remaining were from diverse European countries. Twenty-three percent classified themselves as “lower middle-class,” 49% as “middle middle-class,” and 28% as “upper middle-class.” The average monthly relative net income of the household for individuals in these three classes was 1029 € ( $SD$  697), 2369 € ( $SD$  994), 3398 € ( $SD$  1174), respectively. Participants’ ages ranged from 20 to 74 years ( $M = 38.24$ ,  $SD = 12.46$ ).

**Procedure.** Research assistants approached participants in a medium-sized German city in public areas (in parks, in front of the job center, at places where free food was served). The research assistants were instructed to avoid asking other students because students are highly educated and likely to be socialized in a middle class context, but classify themselves as being poor, because they do not have their own income and have little cash. The study was described as research on opinions of different societal topics. First, participants selected their social class and answered a measure assessing cultural practices. Then, all participants read the following text (in German) that aimed to induce threat toward the ingroup (the specific social class participants had selected at the beginning appeared in the text):

*Please imagine that the government is currently discussing ways to save money. As the discussion proceeds, it becomes clearer that the austerity measure will particularly affect the lower/middle/upper middle-class. The consequences for yourself and the members of your social group would be tremendous. You and your social group would have 15% less income available.*

Afterwards, we assessed group efficacy, inaction, and socio-demographic variables.<sup>1</sup> In addition to educational attainment and gender, we measured monthly net income, size of household, current occupation, and parents' education levels and occupation.

**Measures.** Measures included subjective social class, cultural practices, group efficacy, inaction in the government scenario, and monthly net income.

**Subjective social class.** Participants were asked which of five social classes they perceived themselves to belong to: “poor” (lower class), “lower middle class,” “middle middle class,” “upper middle class,” or “rich” (upper class). We used this three-stage specification to differentiate the middle class because most people say that they belong to the middle class (even when they belong to the “poor”) and are generally reluctant to identify being poor (e.g., Kelley & Evans, 1995). Thus, we expected that “poor” people (e.g., people who were approached at places where free food was shared) would classify themselves as lower middle class. Relative net income correlated with subjective social class ( $r = .66, p < .001$ ).

**Cultural practices.** Cultural practices were assessed with 16 items based on sociological literature (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1985; Schmitt, 2007) that describes these practices as class-specific. All items were assessed on six-point rating scales. Educational habits were assessed with seven items (e.g., Philosophical discussions are boring [reverse-scored]; I am inquisitive for knowledge; it is important for me to further my knowledge; I am not interested in everything that has to do with education [reverse-scored]) on scales ranging from *fully disagree* to *fully agree*. Furthermore, participants were asked how much they read nationwide newspapers (*never* – *very often*), and how much they like to read biographies and information magazines (e.g., “der

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<sup>1</sup> For exploratory purposes, we also assessed identification with one's social class, system justification, social dominance orientation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, perceived injustice and collective action intentions. These concepts are not discussed further.

Spiegel,” *not at all–very much*). Cultural habits were assessed with three items, including “I often try new and foreign food” (*fully disagree – fully agree*), and “How much do you like going to museums (item 1) / theaters (item 2)?” (*not at all – very much*). Shopping habits were assessed by asking participants how often they visit four different German discount stores and organic shops (e.g., “Aldi” and “denms,” respectively; *never – very often*). Finally, their daily television consumption was assessed (*no television, < 30 minutes, 30 minutes – 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours; recoded*). A factor analysis of all 16 items revealed a one-factor solution (Eigenvalues 8.95; 1.00; .87...) explaining 55.93% of the variance. All factor loadings are  $> .61$  ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Higher scores indicate stronger engagement in higher-SES cultural practices ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ).

**Group Efficacy.** After participants read the government scenario, we asked them to report their perceived group efficacy using five items that were specified for the social class they had reported in the beginning (e.g., I think that the lower/middle/upper middle-class can successfully defend their rights,  $\alpha = .90$ ;  $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Items were answered on six-point rating scales ranging from *fully disagree* to *fully agree*.

**Inaction in the government scenario.** Inaction was assessed with three items on six-point rating scales ranging from *fully disagree* to *fully agree* (e.g., I would not do anything; I would not engage in any activities against it;  $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). They were related to individuals (not to the group), because we aimed to measure the individual’s tendency for inaction and not collective inaction.

**Monthly net income.** Monthly net income was assessed on nine-point scales (1)  $< 800\text{€}$  (2)  $800\text{-}1500\text{€}$  (3)  $1500\text{-}2000\text{€}$  (4)  $2000\text{-}3000\text{€}$  (5)  $3000\text{-}4000\text{€}$  (6)  $4000\text{-}5000\text{€}$  (7)  $5000\text{-}6000\text{€}$  (8)  $6000\text{-}7000\text{€}$  and (9)  $> 7000\text{€}$  We observed the following distribution of

participants according to household income brackets: 1 = 2.6%, 2 = 19.5%, 3 = 14.3%, 4 = 7.8%, 5 = 23.4%, 6 = 7.8%, 7 = 6.5%, 8 = 3.9%, 9 = 14.3%. The household incomes were adjusted by calculating a relative net equivalent income using the OECD square root scale in order to control for household size ( $M = 2349.92$ ,  $SD = 1299.77$ ).

## Results and Discussion

We expected that subjective social class would predict personal inaction by way of cultural practices and perceived group efficacy. Thus, we first tested whether subjective social class predicted inaction. As expected, subjective social class and inaction were negatively related ( $B = -.73$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = -3.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [-1.04, -.39]), suggesting that the lower the SES group, the more likely individuals remain inactive when faced with social disadvantage. Next, we tested the components of our expected mediation model. That is, we tested whether subjective social class predicts class-consistent cultural practices that in turn predict group efficacy. We expected that the relation between subjective social class and inaction can be explained via class-consistent cultural practices and group efficacy beliefs. We used PROCESS (model 6 with two mediators operating in serial). The model is depicted in Figure 1. Subjective social class predicted class-consistent cultural practices ( $B = 1.23$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t = 9.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [.97, 1.50]); cultural practices predicted group efficacy ( $B = .38$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = 3.58$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI = [.16, .59] controlling for subjective social class); and group efficacy predicted inaction ( $B = -.59$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = -3.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [-.93, -.23]) controlling for subjective social class and cultural practices. When including both mediators, the above mentioned total effect was reduced to a non-significant direct effect ( $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $t = -.04$ ,  $p = .96$ , 95% CI = [-.56, .54]. As intended, the sequence of mediators was significant (95% CI = [-.63, -.07]), indicating that the relation between subjective social class and inaction can be explained by

cultural practices that, in turn, affect group efficacy beliefs.

In sum, the results of this study extend prior work by showing that social class shapes cultural practices that in turn predict ingroup-related beliefs and behaviors. We show that low-SES individuals (compared to high-SES individuals) engage in class-consistent cultural practices and are less convinced that their own group is effective in getting what it needs. These relatively low levels of group efficacy beliefs have important implications: We demonstrate that low-SES (compared to high-SES) individuals are more likely to remain politically inactive when faced with a social disadvantage. However, it is important to note that instead of focusing on the low-SES individuals, our results could also be interpreted the other way around, namely, that high-SES individuals have high levels of group efficacy and might engage in activism in order to maintain the status quo. We will come back to this issue in the general discussion.

### **General Discussion**

In the wake of the Great Recession, rising social and economic inequality has widened class divisions in society, and in this work we examined the possibility that class-related cultural practices, in and of themselves, have the capacity to create these divisions. Our findings suggest that patterns of cultural expression vary according to social class, which in turn may affirm ingroup beliefs and behaviors, including patterns of political participation. Specifically, we illustrated that people define their online social spaces in terms of social class in ways that allow others to perceive their social class at a level above chance accuracy. This indicates that by simply viewing the cultural practices of individuals captured in uploaded Facebook photographs, individuals express their social class, potentially without their conscious awareness, in ways that allow it to be perceived by strangers.

In the second part, we provide evidence that individuals express their own ingroup space differently based on social class: Class-specific cultural practices (including interests in education, arts, newspapers, TV, and shopping) have implications for ingroup-related beliefs and political organizing. Low-SES individuals (compared to high-SES individuals) are socialized to show cultural practices that relate to lower levels of group efficacy and, in turn, a tendency to remain politically inactive when faced with an ingroup-related social disadvantage. Thus, this research provides evidence suggesting that expressions of culture derived from one's social class have the capacity to create and maintain social class boundaries between individuals (see also Fiske & Markus, 2012).

### **Implications for Social Issues and Social Policy**

The present research has several social and political implications. Our results show that people's psychological reaction to an ingroup-related threat depends on their subjective social class: Compared to high-SES individuals, low-SES individuals reported belief systems that corresponded to lower levels of group efficacy and, in turn, a tendency to remain politically inactive. These results suggest that low-SES individuals are severely affected by financial crises like the Great Recession, and are also disadvantaged in their capacity to respond to the crisis' consequences in a politically effective manner. Alternatively, our results can be interpreted such that compared to low-SES individuals, high-SES individuals show cultural practices that boost a possibly unrealistic perception of their class as strong and able to address ingroup-related stressors. Might low-SES individuals benefit from a boost in personal autonomy (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000)? Would high-SES individuals respond well to more realistic conceptions of personal agency? These are both important questions motivated by the present research with direct implications to the ways in which people engage in politics and

participate in collective action.

Moreover, it is important to note that not all individuals from lower SES groups believe that their group is weak and prefer to remain politically inactive. Instead, there are campaigns initiated by small groups of unemployed people who clearly identify with their social class and fight for more economic equality. The crucial point here seems to be their strong ingroup identification. Here, we refer to politicized identification with lower SES groups or the working class (and we do not refer to identification with cultural practices shown by low-SES individuals). The collective action literature reveals that ingroup-identification is a central predictor of collective action (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Thus, social change is difficult when individuals from lower SES backgrounds do not identify with their social class. As noted above, individuals are rather reluctant to identify with low income classes (Kelley & Evans, 1995) and as Beck (1986) describes, individuals are “classlessly individualized” (for an overview see Bottero, 2004). In line with this, our research shows that class processes still operate and entail serious consequences. One reason for low levels of class identification can be seen in increasing individualization and open group boundaries (at least in people’s minds). From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) identification is more likely when group boundaries are perceived to be impermeable. Our meritocratic beliefs suggest that upward mobility is always possible (Davidai & Gilovich, 2014; Kraus & Tan, 2015). Thus, the promise of mobility reduces ingroup identity particularly among low-SES individuals.

Moreover, although social class largely determines our interests and preferences, the ostensibly free access to symbols (e.g., everyone can listen to classical music) results in a perception that social inequality is fair and freely chosen. Accordingly, it is perceived as an individual shortcoming when a person prefers watching television over going to art museums

(e.g., Schmidt, 2007). Thus, cultural symbols transform socially constructed and “unjust” hierarchies into quasi-natural and “just” hierarchies (Schmidt, 2007). These processes need to be unveiled. One way to discuss these processes would be awareness programs in schools such as those conducted at U.S. universities in order to empower students from lower social classes (Stephens, Brannon, Markus & Nelson, 2015).

### **Limitations of the Present Research**

One limitation of the present work is that we included measures of behavioral intentions only. Future work should examine whether the results extend to real behaviors referring to political organizing. Second, we have collected data in the U.S. and in Germany. Although these two countries have been affected by the Great Recession, it would be important to test the hypotheses in those countries that have experienced the consequences of the Recession to a greater extent (e.g., Greece). Third, although our research indicated that lower-SES individuals were less likely to protest, history shows that they do protest under certain conditions. For instance, low-SES individuals have participated in collective action throughout history (Bullock et al., 2013; Piven & Cloward, 1971). Related to this, it would be interesting to extend the present work among individuals who are highly identified with a low-SES group. As mentioned, the relation between social class and inaction may disappear in a sample including highly identified people from lower income classes. Finally, it would be interesting to use additional measures of political activism in future work. For instance, it has been demonstrated that individuals with low levels of group efficacy are likely to engage in radical collective action (Tausch et al., 2011). Thus, it would be interesting to see whether low-SES individuals prefer strategies other than normative collective action to promote social change.

### **Conclusion**

This research presented evidence suggesting that individuals create their social spaces based on their own class-consistent cultural practices and that these spaces re-affirm class-consistent belief systems. We illustrated that cultural symbols of social class define social spaces in ways that allow for the accurate perception of social class by outside observers. Moreover, we demonstrated the implications for holding class-consistent cultural norms and practices for group efficacy beliefs and political behaviors that re-affirm and legitimize class divisions.

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**Table 1.** Study 1 demographic characteristics for online and university samples.

|                          | Online participants | Student participants |
|--------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Age                      | 36.20 (10.75)       | 19.79 (1.35)         |
| Educational attainment   | 2.72 (0.70)         | 2.08 (0.27)          |
| Father's education       | 2.46 (0.84)         | 3.09 (1.04)          |
| Mother's education       | 2.41 (0.90)         | 2.89 (0.94)          |
| Past Household income    | 3.95 (1.94)         | 5.82 (1.82)          |
| Current Household income | 4.24 (2.14)         | 5.27 (2.56)          |
| Subjective social class  | 5.28 (1.70)         | 7.01 (1.53)          |

Note: The format for each column is Mean (SD). SD = standard deviation.

**Table 2.** Correlations between participant self-reported social class and observer estimates based on profile photographs posted on Facebook.com

| Self-reported social class variables | Full sample participants | Online participants | Students         |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Education                            | -.06                     | .37*                | -.14             |
| Mother's Education                   | .19*                     | -.00                | .21 <sup>+</sup> |
| Father's Education                   | .31*                     | .01                 | .38*             |
| Current Household Income             | .27*                     | .23                 | .23*             |
| Early Household Income               | .34*                     | .16                 | .25*             |
| Subjective Social Class              | .38*                     | .35*                | .15              |

Note: Columns indicate the correlations between self-reported social class variables and observer estimates of social class, broken down according to the full sample and subsamples. The level of statistical significance for each correlation is indicated using the following notation: \* $p < .05$ , <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$

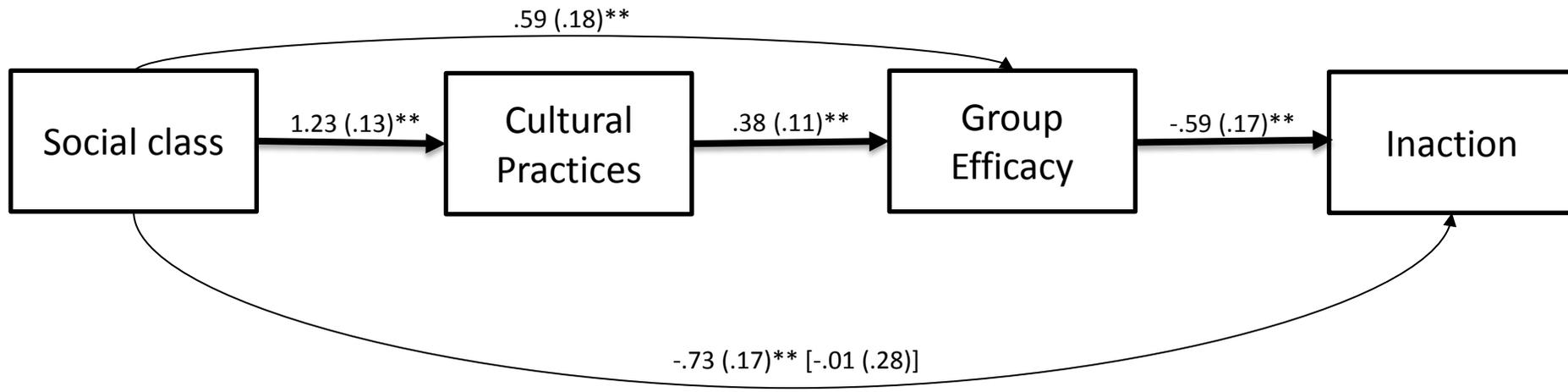


Figure 1: Mediation model illustrating the link between social class and inaction via cultural practices and group efficacy, Study 2