Unpacking the Inequality Paradox: The Psychological Roots of Inequality and Social Class

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Abstract

Why does economic inequality continue to rise despite being disfavored and harmful to individuals and society? To better understand this inequality paradox, we advance an inequality maintenance model of social class. We detail a set of five propositions to encapsulate the psychological processes that perpetuate class division in society—disparities between the rich and the poor—and we review recent supporting data. With respect to the structural processes that define social class, we show that class-differentiated experiences of threat, scarcity, and access to valued networks enhance economic inequality by compounding (dis)advantage in education, work, and relationships. With respect to social perceptual processes, we outline how social class is signaled and perceived during social interactions, triggering class-based stereotypes and patterns of distancing that reinforce inequality. With respect to ideological processes, we discuss how ideologies of merit legitimize economic inequality and bolster class division. With respect to moral–relational processes, we examine how class-based patterns of compassion, helping, and power seeking exacerbate economic inequality by concentrating resources among the upper class and constraining advancement among the lower class. Finally, with respect to intergroup processes, we posit that social class group identities catalyze difficulties in cross-class affiliation, asymmetric resource sharing, and class conflict, strengthening class division in society. We conclude with a discussion of new research and future directions that can address class disparities and, ultimately, help foster a more equal society.

People are loath to talk about social class. Discussing wealth, income, educational attainment, or occupational prestige can be perceived as rude

and inappropriate, and nears the status of a taboo subject (Puchalsky, 2015). The very notion of class structure in society can be threatening: it is inimical to views of society as fair, where upward social mobility is attainable by all. When children first hear of social class, it is often through fairytales that depict class boundaries as permeable—Cinderella stories of positive character that beats the odds and leads the lowly servant girl to ultimately find the embrace of her wealthy suitor, or "Little Engines that Could" tales of how hard work and positive thinking lead to success. Historically, the idea that social class could influence people's lives has been contested; some have denied its very existence (Eichar, 1989).

And yet, over the last decade, social class has come to the fore of people's consciousness and emerged as a coherent focus in social psychology. Unprecedented economic inequality (Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2016), the impact of the 2008 economic recession (Pfeffer, Danziger, & Schoeni, 2013), and the Occupy Wall Street movement ushered social class into the national discourse. Two-thirds of the American public now perceive strong differences and conflict between the rich and the poor (Morin, 2012). Empirical evidence consistently finds that class background profoundly shapes one's likelihood of educational success (e.g., Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), health (Barr, 2014), and life expectancy (Chetty et al., 2016).

At the same time, people prefer equality. When given the option to allocate resources, people favor distributions of resources nearing equality over ones that are more inequitable or unfair (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Henrich et al., 2001; Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012). People express a preference for society to be more economically equal than it currently is (Norton & Ariely, 2011). And yet despite the enormous changes in the industrialized world, from the entrance of women en masse into labor markets to the emergence of China and India to the rise of the new social media, economic inequality is at near historic levels, and social class structures have remained remarkably fixed for centuries (Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Saez & Zucman, 2016).

These observations give rise to an inequality paradox: Why do social class hierarchies—hierarchies based on disparities of wealth, occupational prestige, and educational attainment—persist, and in the present context (at least in the United States), become more extreme, despite the facts that they are disfavored and detrimental to both society and the individuals who live

within them (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009)?[a] We propose that psychological processes help illuminate this inequality paradox and explain why class divisions in society are remarkably enduring despite efforts to change them. Examining these processes is the central aim of our review.

This chapter is guided by a unifying thesis: hierarchies based on disparities of power and resources are self-perpetuating. This thesis has precedent in studies of social stratification and conceptualizations of social hierarchy as, in part, psychologically determined and self-reinforcing, and is guided by research on psychological biases that bolster the status quo (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003; Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius, Levin, Liu, & Pratto, 2000). Here, we extend this thesis to economic hierarchies and class division and, in so doing, advance an *inequality maintenance model of social class*. Elaborating upon Bourdieu's (1984) claim that class distinctions are "inscribed in people's minds," empirical findings in social psychology over the last decade find that social class structures shape the ways individuals think, feel, and act in social situations (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012). In this chapter, we articulate how structural and ecological differences in the lives of individuals from different social class backgrounds, and the psychological tendencies that arise from these disparities, perpetuate hierarchies based on class divisions.

At stake in advancing this model is an approach to tackling new questions central to the study of social class and economic inequality. What psychological processes contribute to the persistence of economic inequality despite evidence that it is deleterious to social groups and collective efforts to mitigate it? Why do first-generation students struggle with access to higher education? Why is upward social mobility so difficult? Why are class and race so divisive in sociopolitical discourse? What strategies might be leveraged to

[a] Throughout our review, we use the term social class to refer generally to a person's standing vis-à-vis others in terms of educational attainment, wealth, and occupational prestige (e.g., Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Although social class is often measured continuously (e.g., income on a linear scale), for heuristic purposes we will use the terms "upper class," "higher social class," "rich," or "haves" to refer to individuals who are of higher wealth, education, and occupational prestige, compared to individuals who score relatively lower on these same indices and whom we will refer to as "lower class," "poor," or "have-nots," recognizing there are clear distinctions within these lower- and upper-class categories (e.g., working-class poor vs unemployed poor; white vs non-white poor; underclass; inherited vs earned wealth; nouveau riche). When describing study findings, we will specify how the researchers measured social class (e.g., in terms of income, occupation, education, and subjective social class).

effectively achieve systemic change? Our inequality maintenance model provides initial answers to these and other questions, as well as new and pressing lines of future empirical inquiry.

1. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY, POWER, AND CLASS

To be a member of a social species is to fold into hierarchies of many kinds. Most, if not all, human societies, collectives, and groups have a stratified structure with fewer people at the top than at the bottom (Fiske, Dupree, Nicolas, & Swencionis, 2016; Guinote, 2017; Keltner, 2016; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Sapolsky, Gholz, & Talmadge, 2017). People array themselves into hierarchies based on myriad dimensions, including physical stature, intelligence, attractiveness, social category, and cultural identity. Although one's position within any given hierarchy can vary by time and context (e.g., receiving a promotion at work; an attractive individual who works as a laborer), hierarchies are inherently vertical and relational: they determine individuals' privileged access to valued resources and influence (e.g., Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008).

Here our specific focus is on social class—a pervasive form of hierarchy rooted in a person's wealth, education, and occupational prestige (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Stephens, Markus, et al., 2012). In a first wave of social psychological research on social class, the focus was to conceive of social class as a form of culture, detailing how through learning norms, values, and expectations, individuals come to embody the beliefs and behaviors that are shared by others of similar social class backgrounds (Kohn, 1963; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). These norms are then expressed with cultural practices that include food consumption, taste in art and music, language, dress, and norms for expressing the self or adjusting to others (Stephens et al., 2007). Building upon this analysis, we first conceptualized social class as a social-cognitive phenomenon: Basic features of social class environments (e.g., survival and social threats, resource abundance or scarcity, social prestige or ostracism) give rise to class-differentiated patterns in cognition, affect, and behavior (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012). For upper-class individuals, their surrounding environments elicit relatively greater perceptions of control and self-sufficiency (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009), which in turn shape cognition (e.g., self-construal, moral judgment), affect (e.g., decreased negativity; Kushlev, Dunn, & Lucas, 2015), and action (e.g., more trait-driven action; Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012). By contrast, lower-class individuals

experience greater threat and reduced opportunity, which gives rise to increased vigilance to the external environment and other individuals (e.g., Kraus et al., 2009; Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012) and more other-oriented and often prosocial patterns of self-construal and behavior (e.g., Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Stephens et al., 2007).

Our first theoretical review focused on the subjective experience of social class and its concomitants and ensuing social consequences. Since then, empirical inquiry has highlighted the importance of social class identities—including current, past, and future identities about one's socioeconomic standing (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017; Jetten, Mols, Healy, & Spears, 2017). Other work underscores how experiences of economic scarcity can cause lower-class individuals to privilege current needs over future ones (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014). Additional research points to social class as a multifaceted construct, a "bundle" variable with interlocking psychological facets (e.g., Sen & Wasow, 2016), broadly influencing people's relationship strategies (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016), their attention to others (Dietze & Knowles, 2016)—even at the level of neural activation (Varnum, Blais, & Brewer, 2016)—and how they respond to the suffering and needs of others (Muscatell et al., 2012).

Critically, as social class has become a clearer focus in social psychology, studies have revealed how it is related to other dimensions of hierarchy, including power (a person's relative control over resources and ability to influence others; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and status (one's levels of respect and esteem; Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Empirical evidence clearly shows, however, that social class, measured both in terms of its objective determinants (family wealth, education, and occupational prestige) and its subjective dimensions (e.g., self-reported on a 10-rung ladder representing the economic hierarchy), is not reducible to power nor status; the intercorrelations between these constructs are small to moderate in size ($rs = 0.10$–0.30; Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012). At the same time, social class is intertwined with other categories of identity and disadvantage, including race (but also gender, sexual orientation, disability, and religion, among others; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch Jr, 1972). For example, people mentally represent welfare recipients (i.e., the poor) as more African American than nonwelfare recipients (Brown-Iannuzzi, Dotsch, Cooley, & Payne, 2017), indicating people may, as a default, conflate class with other identities. Moreover, certain combinations of social class and race have especially potent effects in determining educational

outcomes (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). Given these developments, in this chapter, we will focus on social class but point to important ways in which class and race interact to perpetuate economic inequality and class division.

2. EMPIRICAL TRADITIONS IN THE STUDY OF HIERARCHY MAINTENANCE

The perspective we take in this review—that hierarchies are self-perpetuating—is not necessarily the most welcome assessment, nor is it in keeping with cultural intuitions about the dynamic structure of society. First, counter examples quickly come to mind—recent social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement or the Women's March on Washington, underscore the capacity for collective action to change the status quo (for a historical perspective on such movements, see Zinn, 2006). Empirical research reveals that these sorts of grass roots movements can lead to dramatic political and social change, not only in the United States, but also in other, more authoritarian, oppressive cultures (Burawoy, 1983; Muller & Opp, 1986; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008).

Second, social theorists have not always conceived of hierarchies in self-sustaining terms. One could make the case that it is more typical to think of hierarchies as dynamic processes in which individuals at different positions within hierarchies are continually negotiating positions of rank through the use of different social strategies (e.g., Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; De Waal, 1986; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; Keltner et al., 2008). Implied in this analysis is that social hierarchies are in states of flux.

Third, research and theory point to various benefits of social hierarchy, from increased efficiency to reduced within-group conflict (Anderson et al., 2015). Divisions of labor and the hierarchies that ensue have been posited to lead to increased social harmony, order, and interconnectedness at all levels of the labor process (Durkheim, 1964). This hierarchy-as-harmony perspective is reflected in more recent work. For instance, the pursuit of social status is a near-universal human motivation that drives behavior across numerous social contexts and promotes social functioning and well-being (Anderson et al., 2015). Hierarchy differentiation within teams can help teams perform more optimally (Halevy, Chou, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2012) and avoid serious harm in high stakes contexts, like in the case of scaling Mount Everest (Anicich, Swaab, & Galinsky, 2014). Together, this theoretical and

empirical work casts hierarchy as an important organizing, even unifying force in society.

Notwithstanding these arguments, empirical evidence reveals hierarchies, in particular those related to class, race, and gender, to be remarkably resistant to change (Domhoff, 1998; Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Global wealth continues to be consolidated among the World's most wealthy; as few as eight individuals own as much wealth as half of the world's population (Hirschler, 2017); neighborhoods and schools in America remain remarkably segregated along race and social class lines (Desmond, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1998); despite the end of Jim Crow and chattel slavery, racial disparities in wealth persist (Jones, 1998; Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001); bias within the criminal justice system against Black and Latino Americans is more pronounced than ever (Alexander, 2012); and gender gaps in pay still exist between men and women, despite women being more likely to earn four-year college degrees and increasingly, in many fields, advanced degrees (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012). In the United States, class-related inequalities are more pronounced today than in at any time in the past 300 years (Lindert & Williamson, 2016; Piketty et al., 2016).

This intransigence, or immutability, of class hierarchies aligns well with theories of class conflict in sociology (Bourdieu, 1987; Dahrendorf, 1959; Durkheim, 1964; Kerbo, 1996; Marx & Engels, 1848/1973). In this work, class division tends to emerge between those who control the means of production and those who work within them (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1848/1973). Social institutions such as preparatory schools and private colleges and universities, social clubs, social networks, and asymmetrical political influence reinforce and affirm these class divisions, by closing off participation and access among the lower classes (Domhoff, Staples, & Schneider, 2013). Moreover, state institutions—financial opportunities, public schools, and the criminal justice system—operate to maintain order, which effectively perpetuates class and racial divisions (Alexander, 2012; Fanon, 1961; Foucault, 1975). These processes present numerous barriers to changing the economic status quo and render significant change to class hierarchies the exception rather than the rule. So too, we now argue, do social psychological processes that maintain economic inequality.

3. AN INEQUALITY MAINTENANCE MODEL OF SOCIAL CLASS

Given this background, we now examine the psychological processes by which individuals create and perpetuate social class hierarchies.

Specifically, we seek to illuminate the inequality paradox, why people act in ways that support the economic status quo even when it cannot benefit them, why upper-class individuals might pursue greater personal advantage rather than the common good, and what basic psychological processes lead people to justify and reinforce unfairness in society (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Toward this end, we present our inequality maintenance model and relevant empirical evidence that measures aspects of the social class of individuals (e.g., subjective class position, annual income, neighborhood status, occupational prestige, educational attainment; see Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012). Our model focuses on five interrelated processes (that can covary and mutually influence one another), as represented in Fig. 1.

Our first proposition concerns prevailing *structural barriers* that separate upper-class people from those below. Social class organizes valued social institutions and determines people's access to desirable goods and

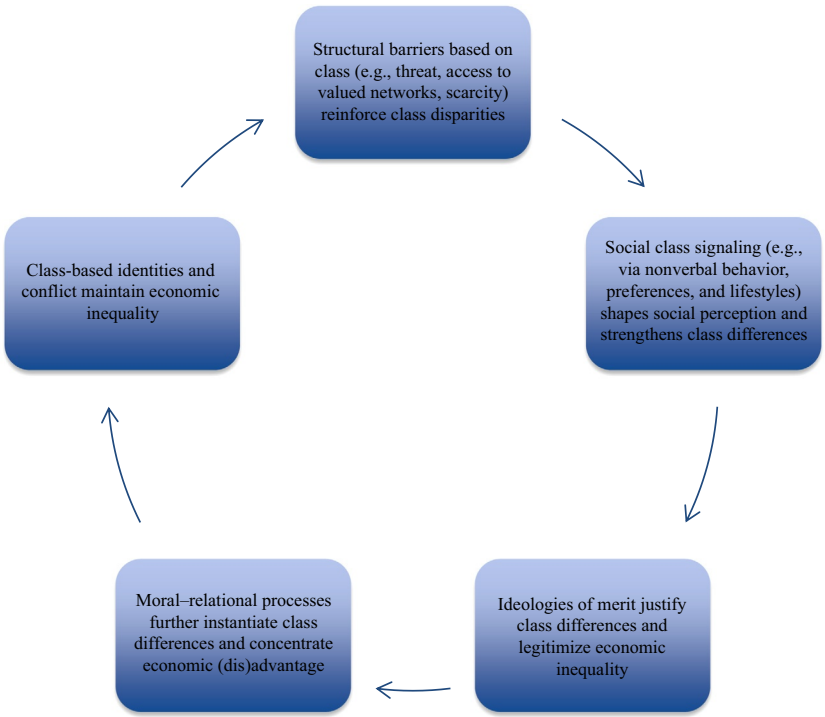

Fig. 1 The inequality maintenance model of social class that illustrates the five domains of social life—structural barriers, social class signaling, ideologies of merit, moral–relational tendencies, and intergroup processes—that contribute to the maintenance of class differences and economic inequality across the life course and over time.

services (e.g., housing, healthcare, food, and internet access), opportunities (e.g., education), and valued social networks (e.g., elite jobs and social clubs), factors that grant upper-class individuals privileged access to opportunities for upward mobility while constraining those same opportunities for lower-class individuals through discrimination and threat (Fiske, 2000; Marx & Engels, 1848/1973; Massey & Denton, 1998). Structural differences between the poor and the rich are also reflected via the material conditions of people's lives, in particular the frequency with which they experience scarcity vs abundance. Thus, within this proposition, we also detail how class differences in scarcity elicit divergent psychological processes that undermine efforts at upward mobility among lower-class individuals and allow those at the top of the class hierarchy to remain on top.

Our second proposition concerns social class *signaling and perception*. Given the aforementioned structural barriers, one might expect that individuals could move through these barriers by taking on the characteristics that signal the class they aspire to *be* rather than the class they *are*—for example, by wearing the "right" clothing, reading the "right" books, or enjoying the "right" art and sports. Here, we discuss the social psychological and perceptual processes that make this kind of aspirational signaling problematic for individuals who pursue economic and educational opportunities in the service of upward social mobility. We detail how social class is signaled and accurately inferred during social interactions (e.g., via patterns of appearance, language usage, and nonverbal behavior), and we describe how social class signaling can trigger class-based stereotypes (e.g., warmth and competence) and patterns of social distancing that reinforce class divisions.

Our third proposition relates to *ideologies of merit* that justify and maintain economic inequality. Given evidence indicating that preferences for equality and fairness are a near universal (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Henrich et al., 2001; Keltner, Kogan, Piff, & Saturn, 2014; Rand et al., 2012), it would stand to reason that people are sensitive to economic inequality and acutely aware of its origins—for example, whether economic inequality is reflective of structural inequalities or differences in individual effort and ability (Kraus et al., 2009), factors that shape how fair inequality is deemed to be and, in turn, what people are motivated to do about it (Starmans, Sheskin, & Bloom, 2017). However, we propose that people are surprisingly unaware of economic inequality, and we delineate several psychological processes—from inequality blindness and positivity biases concerning upward social mobility to the relations between personal control,

deservingness, and construal of economic inequality—that strengthen and reinforce class division.

Our fourth proposition concerns class differences in *moral and relational psychological processes*. The social-cognitive tendencies that arise from structural differences between the lives of the rich and the poor underlie differential patterns of self-focus and attentiveness to others that shape egalitarian vs self-interested social behavior and the moral principles people invoke to justify moral and immoral action (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Piff & Robinson, 2017). In this chapter, we articulate how these social-cognitive tendencies reinforce and maintain social class hierarchies. We detail how upper-class individuals strategically perceive themselves and others and behave in ways (e.g., via self-gain, striving for positions of power) that prioritize individual over collective goals and exacerbate economic inequality by concentrating resources and opportunities among the upper class. We also suggest that lower-class individuals constrain their own economic advancement through reduced self-focus and the shying away from power seeking.

Our fifth proposition concerns *intergroup processes* that arise from social class. We propose that structural segregation and social class signaling conspire to forge strong intergroup identities based on social class (e.g., Destin et al., 2017; Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013). Like other social identities (e.g., race), social class identities guide social perception and interaction. Economic inequality reinforces social class group identities, which, we posit, catalyze processes that strengthen class division in society by increasing difficulties in cross-class affiliation, asymmetric resource sharing, and class conflict.

We close this chapter by asking pressing questions about what it would take to effectively reduce economic inequality and the challenges that would likely emerge from social and political efforts aimed at accomplishing this goal. These future directions leave social scientists with much work to do, but they should also inspire cautious optimism about the prospect of a more equal future for society.

4. THE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS THAT DEFINE SOCIAL CLASS

Individuals from different social class groups live in objectively different social and ecological environments. Lower-class individuals reside in resource-deprived contexts (e.g., with poorly funded schools, higher crime rates, increased pollution) that are unstable and threatening

(Gallo & Matthews, 2003), conditions that upper-class individuals are relatively insulated from. Lower-class individuals experience more extensive restrictions in their life choices and opportunities (e.g., reduced access to different social institutions such as elite preparatory schools, private colleges and universities, social clubs, and corporate boards), which reinforce the power and control upper-class individuals wield over the opportunities afforded to lower-class individuals (Domhoff et al., 2013; Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Veblen, 1899).

These objective, structural differences distance the haves from the have-nots and give rise to distinct behavioral profiles among social class groups that sustain economic inequality. In this section, we detail how structural barriers give rise to heightened threat in higher education, experienced scarcity, and reduced access to networks of opportunity and influence among lower-class individuals that enhance economic inequality. In contrast, upper-class individuals tap into rich social networks of access, opportunity, and influence that perpetuate economic inequality by compounding advantage in education, work, and intimate life (see Table 1).

4.1 Hypothesis I: Social Institutions Produce Threat Orientations Among Lower-Class Individuals That Inhibit Achievement and Economic Mobility

Federal, state, and local community institutions are not class blind. From neighborhood swimming pools to private four-year colleges or universities, people's most valued social institutions are organized by social class. Class biases within social institutions activate threat-related processes among lower-class individuals, which are adaptive in the short run, but when chronic, we contend in our first hypothesis, inhibit achievement and economic mobility for lower-class individuals.

Table 1 Specific Predictions Concerning How Structural Barriers That Define Social Class Maintain Economic Inequality

I. Exposure of lower-class individuals to threats in valued social institutions (e.g., education) inhibits achievement and economic mobility
II. Resource scarcity creates mindsets among lower-class individuals that reduce achievement aspirations
III. Valued networks are denied to lower-class individuals and provide cumulative advantage to upper-class individuals in the form of increased access, opportunity, and influence

The most systematically studied institutional threat faced by lower-class individuals is that posed by educational institutions, and in particular colleges and universities. Although educational institutions promote upward mobility, high proportions of upper-class students attend many if not most "elite" private colleges and universities; lower-class students are almost always the clear numerical minority (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox, & Quealy, 2017; Leonhardt, 2016). These institutions are most frequently led by highly educated and (often) well-compensated administrators; courses are taught by professors from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, most with prestigious degrees. These social conditions give rise to threats produced by educational institutions, which can elicit feelings of anxiety, threat-related neurophysiological responses, and a lack of belongingness among lower-class individuals, which reduce their capacity to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Relevant to this claim, university students from lower-income families expect to feel rejection at their university, an expectation that leads to poor academic performance and reduced contact with university representatives, particularly when these students also believe their abilities are fixed rather than growing and changing (Rheinschmidt & Mendoza-Denton, 2014). Primary and secondary school students from families with lower parental education receive more unfavorable treatment in the classroom, and teachers and evaluators generally have reduced expectations concerning their performance (Batruch, Autin, & Butera, 2017; Croizet & Claire, 1998).

These perceived threats harm academic performance. In one study, when academic tests were framed as diagnostic of ability, students with parents from lower-prestige occupations felt more anxious about confirming negative competence stereotypes about their social class group and, as a result, performed worse than when the same test was framed as nondiagnostic (Croizet & Claire, 1998; see also Spencer & Castano, 2007; for a general argument about stereotype threat, see Steele, 1988). We expect class-relevant processes of stereotype threat to extend to other evaluative contexts where opportunities are at stake—such as job applications and interviews and occupational performance reviews (Rivera, 2016). In a related vein, recent research suggests that the performance deficits lower-class students show on cognitive tests (e.g., Pascarella et al., 2004) stem from heightened experiences of threat, which cause lower-class students to have lower perceptions of their competencies, feel less self-efficacious in domains of learning, and perform worse academically (Jury et al., 2017;

Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). In one series of studies, students from lower-income families reported experiencing more concern about "academic fit" during college, which reduced self-regulation—lower self-reported abilities to set and adhere to academic goals, such as completing required coursework, and reduced performance on cognitive tests of executive functioning (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011).

Subtle processes that activate class-related threat within educational institutions often arise due to the efforts of people who do not anticipate or appreciate the burdens that lower-class students face (Cottom, 2017; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). In one investigation, official university messages describing university life in terms of "choosing your own educational path" were reported as off-putting by students who were the first to attend college in their families (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). In subsequent research, exposure to these messages reduced performance on cognitive tests among these students relative to their continuing-generation counterparts (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Social institutions that provide opportunities for economic advancement also do not anticipate threats to social belonging typically experienced by lower-class individuals, threats that can directly undermine their academic performance.

Even seemingly commonplace classroom behaviors can be threatening to lower-class students' belonging. In one study, making performance differences visible in classrooms by asking students to either raise their hands (or not) each time they completed an answer to a series of reading comprehension questions caused students from lower-class backgrounds (i.e., whose parents had working-class occupations) to experience belonging threat and poorer performance relative to students from upper-class backgrounds (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017). The authors argued that these effects emerged because such public evaluations do not account for the unique additional challenges lower-class students experience in educational settings (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017).

Separation, exclusion, devaluation, discounting, and treatment as "other" among lower-class individuals that is endemic to education is widespread in a number of other valued institutional settings, such as housing, healthcare, politics, finance, and education (for a review of some of this work, see Desmond, 2016; Lott, 2002). For example, in the context of housing, individuals from lower-class groups are significantly more likely to be displaced from their current homes (Carr, 1994) and to experience

financial and policy barriers to securing stable housing (Bernstein, 2003; Desmond, 2016). In the domain of healthcare, individuals from lower-class backgrounds are more likely to be denied care by professional health workers and physicians (e.g., Lott, 2002; World Health Organization, 2000)—patterns that are all the more troubling given the severe health disparities that exist between the rich and poor (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Barr, 2014). In the legal setting, lawyers are more reluctant to provide lower-class individuals with their services, and poorer individuals are more likely to receive severe punishments for their crimes (Lott, 2002; Merry, 1986). When it comes to matters of public policy, at least in the United States, the middle-class and the rich are far more likely to benefit from economically favorable programs, such as tax credits and federal deductions, whereas the interests of the poor are often underrepresented or altogether ignored in political discourse and policy (Gilens, 2005; Gilens & Page, 2014; Hacker & Pierson, 2010). In these and other ways, social institutions create structural barriers in the form of social threats that are disproportionately experienced by lower-class individuals, which in turn reduce their access to, and ability to take advantage of, advancement opportunities.

4.2 Hypothesis II: Lower-Class Environments Create Scarcity Mindsets That Impair Social and Economic Aspirations

The capacity to delay immediate rewards in the service of planning for more favorable long-term outcomes yields many benefits, including improved academic and economic achievement (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). Our second hypothesis details how the scarcity mindsets associated with lower-class environments constrain lower-class individuals' opportunities for economic advancement and mobility, by reducing their capacity to delay short-term gains in the service of future social and economic aspirations.

Scarcity is the experience of lacking something that is valued, which is central to the subjective dimensions of lower social class (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014). Research finds that the experience of scarcity—whether due to a perceived lack of money, time, status, or another desirable good—is mentally taxing, consuming valuable cognitive resources that would otherwise be devoted to planning ahead and problem solving. These effects of scarcity, in turn, increase people's tendencies to make bad decisions and engage in self-defeating actions (Mani, Mullainathan,

Shafir, & Zhao, 2013; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014; Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012).

For example, in one experiment, participants played a game in which they had to guess letters in a word puzzle, and they were randomly assigned to have either 6 guesses (poor) or 20 guesses (rich) per round of the game (Shah et al., 2012). Poor participants (who had been given fewer guesses in the initial task) performed worse in a subsequent unrelated cognitive task than rich participants, revealing how momentary experiences of scarcity can cause cognitive fatigue. In a field study, sugarcane farmers scored significantly lower on cognitive tests 2 months before their yearly harvest, when their resources were relatively meager, than they did 2 months after harvest, when their resources were more abundant (Mani et al., 2013). These two studies suggest that the costly effects of scarcity are not attributable to individual differences that may covary with it, such as education and health.

In another experiment, participants completed measures of cognitive control and intelligence while contemplating financial scenarios that were either relatively manageable (e.g., needing $150 to fix a broken down car) or demanding (e.g., needing $1500 to repair the car). Higher-income individuals performed equally well on the cognitive tests independent of whether they had been thinking of the more demanding or less demanding financial situation. However, whereas lower-income individuals performed as well as their wealthier counterparts on the cognitive tests when thinking about the manageable scenario, their scores dropped when they were thinking about the more challenging scenario, the $1500 repair (Mani et al., 2013).

The experience of scarcity is not randomly distributed across different social classes; it is disproportionately located in the lives of lower-class individuals. One could make the argument, as some scholars have based on relevant correlational evidence (see Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003), that the poor are undermined by certain personalities or innate characteristics such as reduced cognitive ability that caused their poverty. The empirical findings we have reviewed, however, belie this interpretation, by underscoring how anyone, irrespective of their genes or gifts, will exhibit the costs of scarcity when placed in an environment characterized by it. And scarcity can produce behaviors that contribute to the maintenance of economic inequality. For example, the poor's increased willingness to take high-interest loans to meet today's needs irrespective of the loans' deferred costs may arise from the attentional neglect to future planning that scarcity gives rise to (Shah et al., 2012). Scarcity can also be

experienced in other domains, leading to other paths to economic inequality. For example, appraisals of scarce social resources to cope during challenging or threatening social situations—such as adjusting to an "elite" private college or university—may lead lower-class individuals to minimize effort or to avoid such situations altogether (Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). This research highlights deep psychological barriers to class change and upward social mobility among the poor: the experience of scarcity can trigger self-defeating behaviors, such as neglecting to plan ahead or prioritizing short- over long-term goals, which actually worsen one's economic standing.

4.3 Hypothesis III: Upper-Class Environments Produce Cumulative (Dis)Advantage Through Access to Valued Social Networks of Opportunity and Influence

The advantages of upper-class standing are compounded through preferential access to valued social networks (Domhoff, 1998). Resource- and opportunity-rich social networks, as found in neighborhood spaces, schools, clubs, social gatherings, internships, and gateway career opportunities, are concentrated among people from upper-class backgrounds (Burt, 1997; DiMaggio & Garip, 2012; Lin, 2000; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006). Access to these kinds of valued social networks confers many benefits for those fortunate enough to inhabit them. For example, one-in-four current and former US Presidents was educated at Ivy League Schools, and doctoral degree prestige is associated with better placement, more centralized position within discipline, and increased individual production among academic scholars (Clauset, Arbesman, & Larremore, 2015). Through valued social networks, class-related advantages perpetuate themselves; lacking such access, upward mobility among lower-class individuals is constrained.

The cumulative advantage of access to valued social networks is starkly evident in educational contexts. In these contexts, class boundaries, routines, norms, and principles of homophily define network access and centrality and are thus disproportionately likely to leave lower-class individuals on the periphery, or left out completely, of social networks (DiMaggio & Garip, 2012; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). For example, geographic separation by class in neighborhoods and cities ensures that educational institutions with adequate funding are disproportionately clustered around upper-class students (Hochschild, 2003). Moreover, even when granted access to equal educational settings, routine behaviors for individuals who are central to educational networks (e.g., doing unpaid internships, traveling abroad, seeing a

play, or reading *The New York Times*) might be foreign to students from lower-class backgrounds, forcing them to radically adopt new behaviors or risk being pushed to the network periphery. Norms operate in a similar fashion, as centrality in educational networks tends to be influenced by adoption of network norms, such as frequenting the appropriate restaurants or enjoying a shared affinity for a particular sporting event, that favor upper-class students. Finally, homophily principles determine network status: In schools, people tend to affiliate with similar others, thereby ensuring that networks of access and influence will sort and segregate by social class (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

Several studies support our claim that valued networks within educational institutions provide cumulative advantage to upper-class individuals. Low-income children tend to live in less affluent areas that offer public schools with larger classes, lower expenditures per pupil, limited books and supplies, and narrower academic opportunities (Sacks, 2007). These early education trends accumulate over time, until more than 80% of students at four-year colleges and universities come from families with at least one parent who graduated from college (Saenz, 2007). The aforementioned network analysis of academic productivity also reveals the advantages conferred by valued educational networks: Higher status degrees confer additional advantages on people who attain doctoral degrees, positively impacting a number of career outcomes, including promotion and tenure decisions (Clauset et al., 2015). There is no doubt that individuals who are more talented gain access to more prestigious universities, earn higher status degrees, receive better training, and as a result, excel in their careers. It is also evident, though, in empirical findings that we review below, that upper-class standing—irrespective of actual talent, competence, and proficiency—can directly lead to being advantaged in a highly valued social network: the job market.

Several implicit practices favor upper-class job applicants as they enter the upper echelons of the job market. In keeping with networking and homophily principles, managers and CEOs, who are disproportionately from upper-class backgrounds, prefer hiring people who are culturally similar to themselves—workers who will fit into the culture of the organization in terms of their leisure activities, cultural knowledge, and background (Rivera, 2016). Even well-meaning employers may discriminate against lower-class individuals in favor of candidates who are "the right fit." In an empirical demonstration of this phenomenon, resumes that appeared as if they belonged to a lower-class applicant, typically

communicated in descriptions of social and leisure pursuits (e.g., via the presence of membership on the sailing team and an interest in classical music, which signaled higher social class, vs membership on the relay team and an interest in country music, which signaled lower social class) actually disadvantaged applicants for jobs in banking, consulting, and law, presumably because such characteristics were perceived as demonstrating a lack-of-fit between the applicant and the firm (Rivera, 2016; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). In this way, social class becomes a basis of inclusion or exclusion from valued social and professional opportunities and a key path to inequality maintenance. Future investigations should examine whether class biases in access extend to other valued networks (e.g., admission into private universities, online social networks) that further concentrate disadvantage among lower-class individuals while privileging upper-class individuals.

Class-based differences in advantages of access to valued social networks also emerge from mate preferences and marriage patterns. Homophily (i.e., "love of the same") is a principle that guides romantic attraction and marital choice; people interact or bond with others who are similar to them along certain valued dimensions (e.g., race, gender, age, social values; Dehghani et al., 2016; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Research indicates that social class is a significant means by which people choose their romantic partners: the educational attainment, annual income, and occupational prestige of romantic partners tend to be highly positively correlated (Schwartz, 2013)—meaning that people are partnering with others of similar social class backgrounds through the valued networks that link them. Not only does assortative mating by social class signify that class division is reflected and reinforced by personal relationships, but it also directly contributes to economic inequality by increasingly concentrating (dis)advantage within couples and families (Greenwood, Guner, Kocharkov, & Santos, 2014). Given that financial strain is a consistent and significant predictor of divorce and marital discord (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996), lower-class marriages also face additional relational strain that further contributes to these inequalities in social and economic achievement.

In sum, structural barriers enhance experiences of threat in many social institutions (e.g., education), give rise to scarcity mindsets, and deny access to valued networks among lower-class individuals. These processes constrain opportunities for achievement and advancement among lower-class individuals and maintain economic inequality. At the same time, the very structural barriers that limit lower-class advancement favor upper-class individuals; they are preferentially granted increased opportunities to excel

and advance when interacting with institutions that range from small groups (e.g., marriages) to large social networks (e.g., schools, clubs, and places of employment). Given the multiplicative nature of valued networks (i.e., that upper-class individuals are preferentially granted access to them), it is perhaps unsurprising that educational, social, and economic opportunities have become concentrated among the privileged few (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; Piketty, 2015). The structural barriers that maintain inequality, in turn, are intensified by basic psychological processes of person perception—via social class signaling and the stereotypes it triggers—that help to solidify social class barriers and exacerbate economic inequality (see Fig. 1).

5. PERCEPTUAL PROCESSES OF INEQUALITY MAINTENANCE

Status signaling is pervasive across species, and evident in the nest building of bowerbirds, the claw brandishing of fiddler crabs, and the chest beating and submissive postures of large adult primates. These ritualized expressions of social status allow individuals to avoid potentially costly aggressive encounters with high status conspecifics and to form alliances with more dominant conspecifics who can enhance the individual's survival and reproductive fitness (Henrich et al., 2001; Sapolsky, 2004; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008).

Humans are also adept at signaling and perceiving forms of social status. Here, we build on animal models of status signaling (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999) and early theoretical work on class aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899) to suggest that humans have developed a rich, multichannel language of social class signals that relies on communication of cultural tastes, preferences, and social behavior. Through this automatic, rapid, and accurate signaling of social class, boundaries between the haves and have-nots of society are solidified, and economic inequality is perpetuated (see Table 2). Much of the signaling of social class stems from structural

Table 2 Specific Predictions Concerning the Maintenance of Economic Inequality Through Perceptual Processes Related to Social Class

I.	Social class is signaled and accurately perceived early in social perception
II.	Social class signaling activates stereotypes and patterns of distancing that disadvantage lower-class individuals

differences in the lives of people we have just reviewed, most notably differences in access to valued institutions, material resources, and social networks.

5.1 Hypothesis IV: Social Class Is Signaled and Accurately Perceived During the Early Stages of Social Perception

In evolutionary psychology, the handicapping principle holds that signals of status are most likely to be reliable signals of true social position to the extent that they incur costs for the signaler (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999). For example, through displays of brightly colored tail feathers, male peacocks signal an abundance of resources and vitality and gain advantage in securing mating opportunities (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999). Signals of status indicate quality because inferior signalers do not possess the resources to produce them.

Humans signal social class through the communications of tastes and aesthetic preferences, as well as by patterns of social behavior. These signs of social class are not only costly (or expensive) in and of themselves; if revealed to be faked, they incur additional reputational costs for the signaler akin to having poor taste in art, food, music, or other cultural pursuits. It is through the communication of taste, preferences, and interpersonal style that individuals rapidly, accurately, and effortlessly communicate their social class to strangers (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2017; Kraus, Rheinschmidt, & Piff, 2012).

Dress is one obvious means by which individuals signal social class. For instance, a panel of judges accurately guessed the social class of participants, indexed as a correlation between perceiver estimated income and target income ($r = 0.24$), based solely on the type of shoes they wore, with more expensive, nicer shoes associated with upper-class standing (Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012). In another study, static pictures of the upper torso of university employees provided sufficient information to accurately judge the social class of the targets, indexed as a correlation between perceived occupation status and target status ($rs = 0.55$–0.64), indicating that make-up and hairstyle choices elicit accurate signals of social class (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2004; see also Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). In experimental work, participants were more deferent toward an interaction partner who had, unbeknownst to them, been randomly assigned to wear a business suit—signaling upper-class standing—than to a partner wearing sweatpants and a *t*-shirt, signaling lower-class standing (Kraus & Mendes, 2014). Aesthetic preferences for more expensive forms of clothing are sufficient to signal social class to others.

Cultural and taste preferences are often communicated via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where individuals can post content (e.g., photographs) that signals their predilections in food, art, music, and culture. These online posts reveal social class: After viewing the 20 most recent Facebook photographs posted by a sample of targets, naïve judges accurately discerned their social class, indexed in a correlation between perceiver judged income and target income ($rs = 0.27$–0.34), perceived and target parental education ($rs = 0.19$–0.31), and perceived and target subjective social class position in society ($r = 0.38$; Becker, Kraus, & Rheinschmidt-Same, 2017). Using similar methods, judges were able to make accurate inferences about the social class of individuals through viewing pictures of their preferences for living room decor (Davis, 1956). Social class is also signaled in terms of the foods people eat (Monsivais & Drewnowski, 2009), the art they delight in (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978; Snibbe & Markus, 2005), and the leisure activities they turn to for relaxation (Petev, 2013; Rivera, 2016; Veblen, 1899).

Social class signaling also pervades language use. Language reflects many of the structural effects referenced in the prior section, including disparities in education, cultural capital, and the valued social networks one inhabits. In part because of class differences in labor force participation (i.e., a caregiver needing to work instead of spending time with the children), upper-class parents are able to be more involved in the educational lives of their children, for example by reading to them or playing word games at home, which can significantly enhance their vocabulary, grammar, and ability to articulate their thoughts, relative to their lower-class peers (Lareau, 2000). Social class is also communicated through more subtle social linguistic processes, such as the manner in which travel shapes language use. For lower-class individuals who do not have the resources to travel to other regions of the country, linguistic styles typically reflect regional proclivities. In contrast, those from upper-class backgrounds are more likely to demonstrate linguistic cues that represent "proper" or "cultured" forms of speech (see Kraus et al., 2017; Labov, 1972).

Perhaps the best evidence for the imprinting of social class on language comes from the influential work of Labov (1972, 2006). Labov (1972) found that New York City department store clerks pronounced words like "floor" and "fourth" differently based on the social class of their customers. In stores frequented by wealthier patrons, clerks emphasized the "r" sound more than in stores frequented by lower-class patrons (Labov, 1972). However, when asked to pronounce the words a second time during this same interaction, a

behavior suggesting to the clerks that they were not well-understood initially, lower-class store clerks reintroduced the "r" sound to their words, indicating a conscious awareness of how words should sound. In other, experimental work demonstrating how regional language use fuels perceptions of others' social class, participants asked to mimic a cockney, vs standard English, accent were judged as lower in social class by perceivers (Giles & Sassoon, 1983). More recent work demonstrates the power of very brief snippets of speech to signal social class. In the research, 213 speakers from across America were recorded speaking seven isolated words (e.g., words included "thought," "yellow," and "imagine"). A separate panel of naïve perceivers then attempted to guess the social class of the speakers based solely on hearing these recordings. Perceivers demonstrated above-chance accuracy in inferring social class based on this isolated speech, indexed by a correlation between perceiver judged subjective social class position and speaker actual position ($r = 0.22$; Kraus et al., 2017). That naive judges were able to assess the social class of speakers based on hearing seven words spoken out-of-context indicates how powerfully language use signals social class.

Interpersonal styles of communication, including select gestures and nonverbal behaviors during interactions, also signal social class. As we will discuss in later sections of this review, social class differentiates people in terms of the ways in which they approach and interact with others, with upper-class individuals engaging in less other-oriented patterns of cognition and behavior than their lower-class counterparts (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012). Interestingly, these interaction styles also communicate social class: During 60 s of informal interaction between strangers who were video recorded in a laboratory, upper-class individuals (measured both objectively in terms of parental education and income as well as subjectively in terms of ladder ranking) showed less engagement during the interaction, including exhibiting reduced eye contact and spending more time doodling on questionnaires, than their lower-class peers, who were significantly more engaged, as evidenced by their increased head nods and smiles. When a panel of observers viewed these same clips, they were able to accurately infer the social class standing of the participants, indexed by a correlation between observer perceived social class position in society and target self-reports of income, education, and subjective social class position ($rs = 0.23$–0.27). Moreover, these observer inferences of social class were based on class differences in observable patterns of social engagement and disengagement (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Just as language is marked by subtle clues and cues

about a person's social class, so, too, is fleeting moment-to-moment expressive behavior.

How people use and occupy space can also be indicative of interpersonal style and, in turn, social class. The sociologist Goffman (1971) observed that with increased social class came increased space and territory, writing, "In general, the higher the rank, the greater the size of all territories of the self and the greater the control across the boundaries" (p. 50). In a direct test of this idea, researchers coded images culled from the Google Image library using "upper class Americans" and "working class Americans" as search terms. Images associated with the "working class" contained significantly more people than did images associated with the "upper class," suggesting that social class may be visually represented in terms of social density (O'Guinn, Tanner, & Maeng, 2015). In a follow-up experiment, participants were randomly assigned to view one of two spaces—identical in size—that contained either 2 stick figures or 36 stick figures on a white background and were asked to estimate the social class of the people represented. Participants in the low-density condition rated the stick figures as higher in social class than did those in the high-density condition. Moreover, participants who viewed more socially dense spaces were less inclined to affiliate with the people in those spaces and were more likely to devalue objects that appeared in them (O'Guinn et al., 2015).

Overall, it is clear that very thin slices of social behavior—reflections of the access of resources and degree of social engagement—lead observers to reliably infer an individual's social class. All the more striking is just how much of one's social class gets processed during brief exposure to or encounters with others. These social class signals are likely to be barriers to upward mobility for those from lower-class backgrounds, for example, in job interviews, professional networking events, romantic encounters, and informal social gatherings (e.g., rush at sororities or fraternities). Individuals aspiring toward upward mobility must contend with the tendency for their behavior to, unwittingly, leak information about their families, social upbringing, cultural capital, and, potentially, their access to networks of opportunity that employers and higher education institutions explicitly value (Rivera, 2016). How different patterns of social interaction—dining, manners, celebration, dance, and storytelling—manifest in accurate class signals is an important topic of research. So, too, is the study of how these signals activate broader class-based stereotypes that guide patterns of social perception and directly contribute to the maintenance of economic inequality, to which we now turn.

5.2 Hypothesis V: Social Class Signaling Activates Stereotypes and Patterns of Social Distancing That Perpetuate Economic Inequality

Social class signaling shapes social interactions in numerous ways, from patterns of friendship formation to person perception. One line of research has examined the stereotypes that are activated by signals of high or low social class, stereotypes that determine group-level boundaries between the self and others, and serve as potential justification for prejudice, devaluation, and discrimination (Fiske, 2005). The content of class-related stereotypes has important implications for the perpetuation of economic inequality (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

In original work on this matter, Fiske et al. (2002) had participants rate photographs of individuals from 23 groups in society (e.g., the elderly, the rich, racial groups, people with disabilities) based on how others view the groups in terms of warmth (i.e., "Can I trust you?") and competence (i.e., "Can you impact me?"). Relative to a diverse set of other groups that were also rated (e.g., professors, homeless people, and Jewish people), social class was a reliable predictor of stereotype content—rich targets were viewed as low in warmth but high in competence; poor targets were consistently viewed as low in both warmth (diverging from the actual prosocial tendencies observed in lower-class individuals; Piff et al., 2010; Piff & Robinson, 2017) and competence (i.e., untrustworthy and incapable; Durante, Volpato, & Fiske, 2010; Fiske et al., 2002). These social class stereotypes replicated across more than 30 cultural groups throughout the World and in multiple studies (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Durante et al., 2013). Importantly, observable characteristics—including photographs of homes, clothing, language use, and nonverbal behavior—reliably signal social class, suggesting that little information is needed to activate class-based stereotypes (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007).

Signs of social class, wealth, and poverty, then, are sufficient to activate mental representations of social class in judgments of others. Once activated, these class-based stereotypes can have direct consequences that perpetuate inequalities between the haves and have-nots of society. That social class is associated with stereotypes about competence is an initial starting point. To the extent that lower-class individuals are believed to possess reduced intelligence, this can cause others to evaluate their performance in a less favorable light, even when their actual performance is no different from their upper-class counterparts (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). In an experimental test of this possibility, participants viewed a fourth grader

on video answering a series of test questions. The child was described as coming from a lower- or upper-class background. Participants judged the lower-class student as having performed significantly worse and being lower in ability than the upper-class student, even when actual test performance was held constant (Baron, Albright, & Malloy, 1995; Darley & Gross, 1983). Lower-class students, who are already disadvantaged in educational settings relative to upper-class students, can be further undermined in their performance due to teachers' and evaluators' negative beliefs about their social class membership (e.g., Weinstein, 2002).

The stereotypes triggered by social class signaling are also likely to lead to patterns of distancing from those at the bottom of the social class hierarchy, which further intensify their segregation and isolation and constrain their access to valued opportunities and resources. Stereotyped as relatively untrustworthy and incompetent, individuals who signal reduced social class standing may be avoided by others. Various kinds of evidence support these claims. For example, media portrayals rarely depict the poor in television, cinema, and news stories, and on the rare occasion when the poor are portrayed, they tend to be outsiders deficient in character and virtue (Bullock, Fraser-Wyche, & Williams, 2001). A close examination of recent tax policy and social safety net reforms uncovers a similar pattern—a distancing from the needs and threats faced by people at or near the bottom of the social class hierarchy through policy proposals that greatly reduce government interventions for poor individuals and families (Ryan, 2016). Further examining how class-related stereotypes prompt patterns of distancing across domains such as person memory (Taylor, Fiske, Etoff, & Ruderman, 1978), interpersonal judgment (e.g., dehumanization; Haslam, 2006), and approach-related behavior (e.g., Kraus & Keltner, 2009) is an important avenue for future exploration.

Structural processes that divide people from different class backgrounds in terms of their patterned experiences of threat and access to valued resources guide signaling processes that activate class-differentiated patterns of stereotyping and distancing. People's seemingly mundane behaviors and preferences—from their shoes, the clothes they wear, and the leisure activities they engage in to the way they speak and engage interpersonally with others—can trigger inferences about their social class, activating stereotype-related judgments of lower-class individuals as relatively untrustworthy and incompetent. These perceptual processes perpetuate economic inequality and augment the distance between society's haves and the have-nots, processes further buttressed by ideological beliefs that legitimize and reinforce the current economic configurations of society.

6. IDEOLOGIES OF MERIT REINFORCE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Thus far, we have discussed the structural barriers and more automatic social perceptual processes that give rise to social class division in society. We have outlined how these processes are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing—they both reflect and reinforce economic inequality. Building upon these claims, in our third proposition, we contend that social class position shapes the *ideologies of merit* that justify, legitimize, and maintain current class structure (Jost et al., 2004).

Studies using self-report and behavioral paradigms indicate that humans value fairness and equality (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Henrich et al., 2001; Keltner et al., 2014; Rand et al., 2012). Given these results, one might expect people to be opposed to economic inequality. However, social structural configurations (e.g., geographic separation by social class), motivational processes based in core psychological principles such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), and cognitive biases that favor the status quo (e.g., the existence bias, the longevity bias; Eidelman & Crandall, 2014) work in tandem to support, legitimize, and obscure real inequalities of economic opportunities and outcomes in society (Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003). In this section, we detail how social class position shapes lay beliefs and ideologies that justify and legitimize economic inequality, thereby bolstering class division (see Table 3).

6.1 Hypothesis VI: Structural Class Divisions Create Economic Inequality Blindness

An awareness of economic inequality arises in many ways: in reading certain media, in tracking empirical studies, and most obviously, in encountering people from different social class backgrounds. As implied by our review thus far, such social experiences of inequality are unlikely, in particular for upper-class individuals, as people's neighborhoods, communities, and

Table 3 Specific Predictions Concerning the Maintenance of Economic Inequality Through Ideologies of Merit

I.	Divisions between social class groups create economic inequality blindness
II.	Higher social class elicits ideologies of economic and social deservingness
III.	Ideologies of merit enhance economic inequality via political participation

social networks are segregated along social class lines. The perceptual processes we have described also ensure that contact across social class groups will be fraught with discomfort, because stereotypes of lower-class individuals as low in both warmth and competence can sabotage interactions before they begin (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In our sixth hypothesis, we contend that such strong structural and social barriers between social class groups create inequality blindness—a lack of awareness and understanding of economic inequality. Should people not recognize economic inequality as a pervasive problem, they will be less motivated to address it (e.g., Snyder, 1993).

One demonstration of inequality blindness comes from a study by Norton and Ariely (2011), who asked participants to estimate US wealth inequality in society. They found that Americans were far more likely to think that wealth was shared more equally across the economic spectrum than what the objective trends in national economic data reveal: the top quintile of earners holds close to 85% of the wealth, whereas participants estimated around 60% (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Subsequent research examined people's beliefs about global inequality by examining CEO pay relative to the typical factory worker, finding that estimated pay disparities (30–1) were more than 10 times lower than actual disparities (354–1; Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014).

Other work finds that inequality blindness extends to beliefs about economic opportunity and social mobility. Because of structural barriers that augment class divisions, people have little knowledge of the actual base rates with which people move up or down the class hierarchy. Lacking this knowledge, and given how prevalent narratives of personal struggle and mobility are (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015, 2016; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Rivera, 2016), people should overestimate rates of upward social mobility. Indeed, when compared with national estimates of inter- and intragenerational mobility, Americans greatly overestimate the extent that higher social class is an achievable reality for all. In one study based on nationally representative data collected by Pew, lay perceptions of movement from the bottom to the top income quintile were higher than were estimates of actual mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). In a second study, participants overestimated the extent that universities admitted low-income students (16%) relative to actual admission trends observed in the Current Population Survey (3%), and the extent that people from the bottom half of the income distribution move into the top income quintile (estimated 16%; actual <1%; Kraus & Tan, 2015).

Widespread misperception of the distribution of wealth and economic mobility is likely to give rise to the legitimization of economic inequality. Notably, recent work demonstrates how these misperceptions compound each other—high mobility beliefs lead people to permit inequality (Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016) and support the current structure of society (Day & Fiske, 2017); in other words, believing that higher social class is equally attainable leads to increased acceptance of current economic disparities and the increasing concentration of wealth in the 1% and intransigence of poverty. It will be interesting to test whether high mobility beliefs also cause people to see others' socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., their levels of wealth vs poverty) as more personally controllable (e.g., Kraus et al., 2009) or to invest more effort toward upward social mobility because they deem it more possible. Moreover, even though perceptions of inequality and mobility are inaccurate, the tendency to underestimate inequality supports individual desires for fairness and justice—meaning that the effort needed to update these beliefs is likely to be high (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). These misperceptions also support basic motivational processes leading upper-class individuals in particular to ideological beliefs of economic merit and deservingness.

6.2 Hypothesis VII: Higher Social Class Is Accompanied by Ideological Beliefs of Economic, Personal, and Social Deservingness

Since Marx's analysis (1859), and probably before, there has been long-standing interest in people's beliefs about social inequality, and how these beliefs contribute to the maintenance, stability, and reproduction of economic inequality (e.g., Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Here, we contend that upper-class standing gives rise to ideological beliefs of economic merit in society. In essence, elevated position in the social class hierarchy can be psychologically distressing, even socially dangerous, if that position is unfairly or unjustly determined (e.g., Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Swim & Miller, 1999). Thus, as people's position in society rises, so, too, will their tendency to endorse merit-based explanations of economic inequality and privilege.

Several studies find support for this hypothesis. In one nationally representative survey, Americans with higher incomes were more likely to say that wealth and poverty were the result of individual characteristics like hard work, talent, and motivation, and less likely to say these outcomes were the result of structural forces (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). When examining

perceptions of economic inequality, a similar pattern emerged: Participants higher in subjective social class were more likely to attribute inequality to individual characteristics like hard work and effort and less likely to attribute inequality to structures of inheritance or discrimination (Kraus et al., 2009). Individualistic attributions for poverty and wealth are, in turn, associated with beliefs that economic inequality arises because of differences in ability and talent, reduced support for wealth redistribution, and greater endorsement of restrictive welfare policies (Bullock et al., 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

The findings reviewed above linking higher social class to increased ideologies of deservingness and merit are correlational in nature, in part because social class is more typically measured and not easily manipulated. As a result, inferences of causality in this realm are suspect. Although we have contended that upper-class standing gives rise to beliefs about economic merit and deservingness, a competing and equally viable interpretation is that ideologies of merit and beliefs that hard work leads to success may cause people to be more likely to succeed, by increasing their motivation, ambition, and willingness to invest effort. As such, experiments that manipulate a psychological feature of social class (i.e., relative rank) and test for downstream shifts in ideology would pit these competing interpretations against one another.

A study by Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, and Payne (2015) provides an experimental demonstration of this ideological justification process. In this experiment, the researchers used a series of small monetary decisions to provide performance feedback to participants. After being informed they were high or low performing, which served as an in situ manipulation of relative rank, participants were then asked to indicate their support for a system of redistribution that would redirect earnings from the top players to those at the bottom as a form of credit. Participants who had been randomly assigned to learn that they were high ranking were less supportive of redistribution, more likely to view the game as fair, and more likely to view society more generally as open and meritocratic (e.g., "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness") than those randomly assigned to learn they were lower ranking (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015). In games, as in life, elevated social class standing would seem to cause people to adopt ideologies of merit that favor the economic status quo and oppose efforts to change it.

Merit-based explanations for wealth can be difficult to fully justify, especially given how powerfully family wealth, independent of effort or talent, shapes a person's station in society. Essentialist beliefs about the innate,

biological characteristics of social class can help individuals explain intergenerational wealth transmission in merit-based terms (for a broader discussion of biological essentialism, see Heine, Dar-Nimrod, Cheung, & Proulx, 2017). For instance, people reporting they were higher in subjective social class, by placing themselves on a 10-rung ladder representing class position in society, were more likely to suggest that position in the socio-economic hierarchy was rooted in differences in genetics and biological temperament (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Notably, essentialist theories about social class, in turn, drove upper-class individuals to favor punishing individuals who behaved unlawfully instead of advocating for their rehabilitation. In one experiment, participants—irrespective of their actual social class—were manipulated to feel higher or lower in social class rank by comparing themselves to an individual who was relatively more or less economically advantaged in society. Participants made to feel higher in social class endorsed more essentialist views of social class and more punitive judgments (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). These findings indicate that upper-class background may actually cause hierarchy-maintaining beliefs and behaviors, such as harsher forms of punishment and incarceration. Beyond punishment, essentialist theories of social class among upper-class individuals may sustain economic inequality through many means: by explaining away rich–poor differences as naturally determined and immutable, decreasing support for restorative social welfare policies, and undermining efforts to increase upward social mobility among the poor.

Upper-class individuals feel deserving of their own elevated positions in society. Research finds that psychological entitlement—the feeling that one deserves more than others (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004)—rises with social class. Adults who rated themselves higher in social class, as well as students whose parents were more highly educated, scored higher on the Psychological Entitlement Scale by more strongly agreeing with statements like, "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others" (Piff, 2014). Increased feelings of entitlement, in turn, lead wealthier individuals to be more reactive to perceived unfairness or interpersonal slights. For example, when wealthier individuals were offered less than they felt they deserved in an economic game, they were more likely to reject the offer even when it was costly (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, & Lange, 2017). These findings indicate that upper-class individuals may be less averse to inequality unless their own well-being is directly impacted by it.

Upper-class individuals also score higher on various measures of narcissism, a construct that reflects a more inflated view of the self and a

dominant orientation to others (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016; Piff, 2014). Critically, narcissism is directly associated with increased endorsement of group-based hierarchy and income inequality (Zitek & Jordan, 2016), indicating that upper-class individuals may be more supportive of inequality in part because they are more likely to perceive themselves as benefiting from it. Furthermore, increased entitlement and narcissism enable upper-class individuals to perceive their elevated position vis-à-vis others as more deserved, which may lead them to react more defensively to policies that reduce economic inequality and threaten their privilege (e.g., Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007).

6.3 Hypothesis VIII: Ideologies of Merit and Inequality in Political Participation Exacerbate Economic Inequality

Whether it concerns taxation, healthcare, education, welfare programs, or the minimum wage, social and economic policies shape income inequality and class division (Smeeding, 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Although policy is typically regarded as a macro-level structural factor that influences broad societal outcomes, policies find their origins in the ideas, values, actions, and interests of individuals and groups. Guided by our hypotheses and relevant evidence concerning relations between social class, inaccuracies of economic perception, and beliefs about deservingness, we propose that social and economic policy—because they disproportionately reflect the values of elites—are a particularly viable route to inequality maintenance. In this fashion, both structural barriers and ideologies of merit impact policy in ways that favor the influence of upper-class individuals.

Several lines of evidence indicate that higher social class predicts enhanced political efficacy and influence. Upper-class individuals use their increased financial resources and social connections to gain more power and sway over their local, state, and federal officials, and more influence over policy (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Studies of senators' votes and federal government policy consistently find that they are increasingly aligned with the policy preferences of wealthy Americans compared to the preferences of lower-class citizens, an association readily attributed to several processes we have considered thus far, such as reduced contact across social class divides and ideologies of merit (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005, 2012; Page, Bartels, & Seawright, 2013). Whereas upper-class individuals are relatively politically engaged, lower-class individuals do not have the financial resources, free time, nor social connections to effectively participate in politics, and for these and other reasons, they tend to withdraw from political participation (Brady, Verba, & Lehman-Schlozman, 1995; Gelman, 2009;

Krosnick, 1991; Lijphart, 1997; McDill & Ridley, 1962; Scott & Acock, 1979). For example, lower-class individuals are less likely to vote (e.g., Mcelwee, 2015; "The Politics of Financial Insecurity," 2015), less likely to volunteer for political campaigns (Verba & Nie, 1972), and less likely to attend a political gathering (Scott & Acock, 1979). These forms of disengagement likely stem from processes we have considered thus far, such as perceived threat in institutions or lack of access to valued networks, and further bias the political process toward inequality maintenance.

When combined with upper-class individuals' tendency to endorse ideologies of merit and deservingness, this inequality of political participation has predictable influences on the trajectory of social and economic policy: Many studies find that greater income and status are associated with higher levels of support for economically conservative political candidates, reduced support for social welfare programs, and less support for government intervention in reducing inequality (e.g., Andersen & Curtis, 2015; Bartels, 2006; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2016). In one investigation, compared to the general public, individuals in the top quintile of the wealth distribution were less supportive of providing help to the poor in the form of healthcare and a higher minimum wage; less willing to fund minority serving or public schools; less supportive of universal health coverage; and, by a factor of close to four, more likely to oppose heavy taxes on the rich to distribute wealth (Page et al., 2013; see also Hayes, 2013). In other research, wealthier members of the US House of Representatives were significantly more likely to oppose legislation that would decrease economic inequality, for example by raising the minimum wage, relative to less wealthy politicians (Kraus & Callaghan, 2014).

In this section, we have detailed how inequality blindness gives rise to greater tolerance of inequality and increased endorsement of the economic status quo. We have further described how upper-class standing is accompanied by ideologies of merit that cause people to view class differences as essential, legitimate, and deserved, the natural order of things. Finally, we have examined how ideologies of merit are especially potent for inequality maintenance in the political realm, given class asymmetries in participation and influence. How these powerful informational and motivational forces can be upended in the service of greater societal equality is a topic of constant and pressing empirical inquiry. Though promising, this area of inquiry is also likely to be challenging given the self-serving and motivational biases at play in how people perceive and construe economic inequality (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2005)—people may respond defensively, even aggressively, to ideological threats to their views

of the economic system. Moreover, shifting class-based ideologies of merit in hopes of enhancing societal equality would necessitate changing the ways in which social class shapes moral judgment and relational strategies—the focus of our fourth proposition.

7. MORAL–RELATIONAL PATHS TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Increased material resources and relative rank afford upper-class individuals greater self-sufficiency and reduced vulnerability to social and environmental threat (Johnson & Krueger, 2005, 2006; Kraus et al., 2009)—factors that give rise to an *internal, self-oriented focus* (i.e., greater attention to one's internal states and goals). By contrast, lower-class individuals inhabit more threatening social environments (e.g., unstable jobs and home lives; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005), and reduced resources limit their personal control and individual autonomy, rendering them more vulnerable to external influences. As a result, lower-class individuals develop an *external, other-oriented focus* (i.e., greater vigilance to external contexts and individuals within them). These class-differentiated orientations manifest in distinct moral–relational stances toward others. Upper-class individuals emphasize the moral foundations of authority, respect, and individual rights, and they express more freedom and independence in social relationships (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). By contrast, lower-class individuals endorse a different array of moral foundations, prioritizing purity and harm to others, and they express greater interdependence and warmth in social relations (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Piff et al., 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012).

Here, we describe how these class-related moral–relational tendencies maintain social class division and sustain inequality. Our two predictions center upon how class-related compassion and helping toward others in need as well as class differences in power seeking contribute to economic inequality (see Table 4).

Table 4 Specific Predictions Concerning the Maintenance of Economic Inequality Through Class-Based Moral–Relational Processes

I. Higher social class reduces compassion and heightens self-interest
II. Higher social class increases power seeking behavior

7.1 Hypothesis IX: Higher Social Class Curbs Compassion and Heightens Self-Interest in Ways That Exacerbate Inequality

Robust empirical evidence suggests that one's position in the social hierarchy—whether it is derived from disparities in education, income, culture, status, social rank, or opportunities to exercise power and control—shapes patterns of social engagement, which can affect compassion and the extent to which individuals seek to advance the welfare of others (e.g., Fisman, Jakiela, Kariv, & Markovits, 2015; Guinote, Cotzia, Sandhu, & Siwa, 2015; Hogeveen, Inzlicht, & Obhi, 2014; Piff et al., 2010; Schurr & Ritov, 2016; Stellar et al., 2012; Varnum, Blais, Hampton, & Brewer, 2015). We contend that these documented class differences in compassion and self-interest can directly contribute to the maintenance of class division and economic inequality by reducing empathy and understanding of others in need, and by concentrating resources among those who already have an abundance of them.

Lower-class individuals are more attentive to the welfare of others in social interactions and more prosocial, relative to upper-class individuals (Piff & Robinson, 2017). Uncertainty and feelings of reduced personal control—appraisals associated with lower-class standing—cause stress and prompt desires to seek other sources of stability (e.g., Jonas et al., 2014; Piff, Stancato, Martinez, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012). Vigilance to the external environment and socially affiliative behaviors can serve as adaptive responses to reduced personal control and uncertainty (e.g., Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Shuper, Sorrentino, Otsubo, Hodson, & Walker, 2004). As such, whereas upper-class individuals are more self-sufficient, lower-class individuals meet the demands of their social environments through social support and efforts to attune to the welfare of others. In line with this theorizing, in a nationally representative sample of Americans, lower income was associated with more time socializing with others and less time spent alone (Bianchi & Vohs, 2016), and in a study of the social media platform Facebook, lower income and self-reported social class standing predicted greater numbers of international friends (Yearwood et al., 2015).

There are, in turn, numerous empirical demonstrations of class differences in other-regarding cognition (e.g., other-directed attention, empathy) and compassion—an emotion attuned to the suffering and needs of others (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). In one study using eye-tracking technology, individuals who identified as lower class spent more time looking at other people in photos depicting various street scenes, relative

to those who self-identified as upper class (Dietze & Knowles, 2016). Studies using fMRI and EEG find that: brain regions associated with inferring others' mental states were more active in lower-income than higher-income individuals when viewing pictures that included social information (Muscatell et al., 2012); and individuals who reported being lower in social class displayed more intense activation in brain regions that support empathic processes when viewing images of others in pain (Varnum, Blais, & Brewer, 2016). In another set of studies, lower-class individuals (as indexed by a composite of household income and parental education) self-reported greater compassion when observing a video depicting others' suffering and displayed increased compassion-related peripheral physiology (heart-rate deceleration; Stellar et al., 2012). Replicating and extending these findings in a large nationally representative U.S. sample, lower-income participants reported more other-oriented experiences of compassion and love (and also greater awe), relative to higher-income participants, who reported more self-oriented feelings of pride and contentment (Piff & Moskowitz, in press). Moreover, these class-related differences in compassion cannot be attributed to differences in emotional reactivity, but rather to class differences in the extent to which individuals attend to and empathize with the needs of others (Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013).

Sensitivity to the welfare of others and compassion are proximal determinants of prosocial behavior (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Goetz et al., 2010), or actions that prioritize the interests of others, whether it is via sharing with, caring for, or assisting others, over one's individual interests and goals (Keltner et al., 2014). In studies of prosocial behavior, individuals from lower-income backgrounds volunteered more personal time to help a stranger in distress, and individuals lower in subjective social class donated more points (redeemable for cash) to an anonymous partner, compared to upper-class individuals (Piff et al., 2010). Children from lower-income families donated more prize tokens to an anonymous sick child than those from upper-income households (Miller, Kahle, & Hastings, 2015). Other studies find that individuals higher in subjective social class are more likely to attempt to maximize self-interest by taking valued goods from others, lying in negotiations, and cheating to increase their chances of winning a prize (Piff, Stancato, Côté, et al., 2012), whereas individuals lower in subjective social class will cheat in a game to increase another person's chances of winning (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015).

Although it is plausible that individuals who are generally more self-interested (and competitive) may also be more inclined to accrue resources

and achieve upper-class standing, experimental evidence indicates that perceptions of higher social class standing directly increase self-interested behavior. In one experiment (Piff, Stancato, Côté, et al., 2012), participants who were made to feel higher in social class endorsed more self-interested unethical behavior (e.g., stealing from their place of work) and took more candy from a jar reserved for children, relative to participants made to feel lower in social class (for a review of these and other findings within this domain, see Piff & Robinson, 2017; Piff, Stancato, & Horberg, 2016). Together, these findings indicate, with a few exceptions (e.g., Korndörfer, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2015), that upper-class individuals, who are relatively more resource rich, are more self-interested and less likely to share with others.

We propose that class differences in compassion and prosocial behavior bolster class distinctions by increasing upper-class individuals' feelings of dissimilarity to the poor, reducing their concern for the suffering of others, and curtailing tendencies toward sharing and generosity. Recent empirical findings indicate that state and trait compassion amplify feelings of similarity to those who are vulnerable or are in need, indicating that compassion may expand one's ingroup to include those who suffer or require assistance (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010). Upper-class individuals' reduced compassion may increase their feelings of dissimilarity from lower-class individuals, fuel antagonism toward them, and increase their perceived blameworthiness—all of which should negatively impact their feelings of responsibility for and desires to help economically disadvantaged others (Goetz et al., 2010; Hunt, 1996; Smith, 2009). In line with this theorizing, trait-like tendencies to experience compassion-related states (i.e., empathic concern) predict increased support for government policies that alleviate suffering and enhance the welfare of those in need (e.g., the elderly, children, and the poor; Smith, 2009).

Moreover, as we have reviewed, economic disparities in the United States are at record levels; an increasing majority of the country's financial wealth belongs to a decreasing few. Cast within our framework of inequality maintenance, class differences in self-interest indicate that a self-perpetuating dynamic may, in part, contribute to these troubling trends. Even before the financial collapse of 2007–08, and certainly since, there has been a multitude of accounts detailing the role played by self-interest and greed on the part of upper-class individuals in fueling economic inequality, particularly in the corporate and financial sectors (e.g., Ahamed, 2009; Faber, 2009; Farrell, 2011; McDonald & Robinson, 2009; Philippon & Reshef, 2012;

Smith, 2012). The empirical findings we have described on social class and prosocial behavior indicate that self-interest on the part of upper-class individuals may generalize to various domains of social life, from tendencies to offer help and resources to another person to motivations for self-gain. Whereas lower-class individuals may be more inclined to share and give their resources away, upper-class individuals may tend to preserve and hold onto wealth, and seek out opportunities—even behaving in counter-normative ways readily justified by ideologies of merit—to accrue more of it. This differential pattern of giving vs accruing among the rich and the poor could serve to exacerbate economic inequality—a hypothesis worthy of examination.

7.2 Hypothesis X: Class Differences in Power Seeking Reinforce Class Hierarchies

Interwoven throughout the core propositions of our inequality maintenance model are the many processes that render it difficult for individuals from lower-class backgrounds to advance in the class hierarchy. Lower-class individuals must contend with diminished access to education, supportive mentoring, and valued social and professional networks, and increased experiences of threat—in the form of devaluation, discrimination, and bias—all of which undermine their strivings (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2015; Rivera, 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012, Stephens, Markus, et al., 2012). These factors serve as barriers to lower-class advancement and perpetuate inequality.

We propose that there is an additional moral–relational obstacle to lower-class individuals' advancement: power seeking. Specifically, class differences in perceptions of what power is and how it is obtained may generate differences in the extent to which individuals from different social class backgrounds seek out opportunities to acquire greater influence and power. Research by Belmi and Laurin (2016) provides initial support for this claim. Across several studies and multiple assessments of social class (e.g., subjective class rank, income, and parental education), lower-class individuals were less likely than their upper-class counterparts to seek out powerful or high-ranking positions in organizations—for example, by self-reporting reduced desires to attain power in an organizational hierarchy. Lower-class individuals also tended to believe that to acquire power, one has to engage in self-interested political maneuvering, that is, to be strategic, manipulative, and Machiavellian—tendencies that, as we have reviewed, lower-class individuals are relatively more averse to (Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012;

Piff et al., 2010)—and their beliefs about power explained their reduced desires to attain it. However, when lower-class individuals were experimentally induced to believe that power could be acquired through prosocial, other-benefiting means, they became as likely to seek positions of power as upper-class individuals (Belmi & Laurin, 2016).

These findings reveal quite clearly that class differences in beliefs about power and advancement are likely to perpetuate income inequality and class divisions. Lower-class individuals may feel discouraged from seeking out opportunities for greater status, wealth, and influence due to their belief—misguided or not—that, to do so, one must acquire devalued social behaviors, including self-interest, manipulation, exploitation, and deception. This is problematized by recent findings showing that prosocial traits are effective avenues for the attainment of status and prestige in social groups (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; for review, see Keltner, 2016; Willer, 2009). Furthermore, because they are more focused on others and less focused on themselves, lower-class individuals may eschew opportunities to self-promote or otherwise stand out (e.g., by neglecting to take credit for their contributions to a team task). These tendencies may further exclude them from valued networks and opportunities, by decreasing the extent to which they are deemed valuable members of a team, group, or organization, and further undermine their chances for advancement. Complementarily, upper-class individuals, who are more self-focused and accustomed to attaining power through self-interested means, may not only be more likely to seek out positions of power, but also to do so in ways that undermine the welfare and advancement of others, which would reinforce the class hierarchy.

In this section, we have reviewed how well-documented class differences in moral–relational tendencies perpetuate economic inequality. Class-based patterns of moral judgment and core relationship strategies reduce self-promotion and power seeking among lower-class individuals, and render upper-class individuals less concerned with the disadvantages of others—preferentially favoring their own advancement in society over others' needs. Class-based moral–relational differences in compassion, self-interest, and power seeking operate in tandem with structural, perceptual, and ideological patterns to further reinforce extant class hierarchies. Future research should test the contours of class differences in the pursuit of power, particularly with regards to their implications for various processes, such as attending graduate and professional schools and working in certain sectors like finance and law, which contribute to economic

inequality. One fruitful avenue will be to explore whether individuals from different social class groups hold divergent views of upward economic mobility and the social traits and values that best enable it, which should influence how motivated people are to climb the socioeconomic hierarchy and the strategies they use to accomplish this goal.

8. CLASS-BASED IDENTITIES AND CONFLICT MAINTAIN ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Our review thus far has focused on the structural, perceptual, ideological, and moral–relational routes to inequality maintenance, all means by which individuals justify, legitimize, and maintain class differences in society. In our fifth and final proposition, we outline how the group identities that arise from class distinctions shape and sustain economic inequality.

The social groups to which people belong are foundational to personal identity. People form and join groups based on salient social characteristics, such as race and gender (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These social identities, in turn, drive ways of construing and relating to others—they enhance feelings of positivity toward one's own groups, drive perceived differences and negativity toward outgroups, and heighten intergroup competition and conflict (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherif, 1961; Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social class is fundamental to a person's identity; people ascribe meaning and value to both their and others' social class membership and use it as a social heuristic to guide social interactions (Destin et al., 2017; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Guided by the rich literature on intergroup relations (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Brewer, Brown, & Fiske, 1998; Tajfel, 1982, 2010), we propose that group identities founded on social class catalyze several intergroup processes that strengthen class division in society. They do so by giving rise to difficulties in cross-class affiliation, triggering asymmetric resource sharing, and sowing the seeds of class conflict (see Table 5).

Table 5 Specific Predictions Concerning the Maintenance of Economic Inequality Through Social Class Group Identities

I. Social class group identities create affiliation barriers
II. Resources flow upward during cross-class interactions
III. Cross-class interactions elicit class conflict

8.1 Hypothesis XI: Social Class Group Identities Create Barriers to Affiliation That Constrain Lower-Class Advancement

Social interactions between individuals from different social groups (e.g., racial categories and ideological categories) are often fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Relative to interactions with individuals of the same group, cross-group interactions evoke more anxiety, threat, and stress, outcomes that are linked to reduced well-being (e.g., Page-Gould, Mendes, & Major, 2010; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008; Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012). Social class, as a salient group identity, should also guide how interactions unfold across social class group boundaries.

As we reviewed earlier, individuals accurately signal social class in numerous ways and perceive others' class backgrounds very early in social interactions. As a result, social class is integral to first impressions, which critically determine how interactions unfold (Ambady & Skowronski, 2008). Given known cultural differences in how individuals from different class groups think, feel, and act (e.g., Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2007), signals that communicate interpersonal differences in social class identity are likely to shape feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and distance. This should be especially true for lower-class individuals, whose class identities are relatively more stigmatized and devalued (Johnson et al., 2011; Rheinschmidt & Mendoza-Denton, 2014). Anxiety and discomfort that arise during interactions between individuals from different social class groups can create immediate barriers to short- and long-term relationship formation across social class boundaries—relationships that determine one's access to valued social networks, connections, and opportunities that enable upward social mobility, particularly for lower-class individuals (Domhoff, 1998). As a result, anxiety and tension that arise during cross-class interactions may constrain lower-class individuals' opportunities for advancement and reinforce social class group disparities.

Research yields support for this line of reasoning. One series of studies examined whether lower-class individuals, aware that their social class background will be viewed negatively by others (e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001), attempt to conceal their class by strategically modifying their behavior, particularly in interactions with upper-class individuals (Garcia, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 2007). In both real and imaginary interactions with individuals identified as upper-class, lower-class individuals (e.g., from lower-income backgrounds) reported less comfort and an increased tendency to modify their behavior, and they were more likely to manipulate

their facial expressions and make themselves "difficult to read" (Garcia et al., 2007), relative to upper-class individuals. Awareness of differences in social class identity during social interactions reduces comfort and authentic expressivity, particularly among lower-class individuals.

Along similar lines, Côté et al. (2017) investigated patterns of social affiliation—attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that connect people and promote interpersonal closeness—across and within social class groups. In one study, participants were paired with another unacquainted participant from either the same or different social class background before taking part in a video-recorded interaction. Importantly, no information about participants' social class backgrounds was provided other than what was discernible during the interaction. Across the studies, self-reports of intentions to affiliate, along with expert codes of Duchenne laughter during the interaction (Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993), were used to index engagement between participants. The highest rates of social engagement were found among same-class interaction pairs at the extremes of the social class continuum, where people's social class identities were the most distinctive and, presumably, the most easily identifiable by others.

Together, these findings indicate that social class identity, so richly and automatically signaled during social interactions, directly undermines relationship formation between individuals from different social classes. Signs that one is interacting with an individual from a different social class group can undermine feelings of comfort and tendencies toward authentic self-expression, which are central to the development and maintenance of strong relationships (e.g., Côté et al., 2017; English & John, 2013; Garcia et al., 2007; Van Kleef, 2009). The difficulties in affiliation that arise from differences in social class identity solidify class distinctions by rendering the boundaries around social class groups less permeable and malleable, and more anxiety producing to traverse (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). Moreover, we suggest that class barriers to affiliation across diverse contexts—whether in education, work life, or extracurricular—constrain lower-class individuals' access to individuals of higher social class and the valued networks they make up, another means by which economic inequality is reproduced.

8.2 Hypothesis XII: Cross-Class Interactions Elicit the Upward Flow of Resources

Building upon replicated findings that lower-class individuals are more likely to share and help relative to their upper-class counterparts

(Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010), we now detail how these tendencies give rise to how the flow of resources moves up class hierarchies. We hypothesize that in cross-class interactions, the visibility of social class group identities causes people to engage in strategic forms of resource sharing that exacerbate economic inequality, a particularly ironic outcome of the generous tendencies of lower-class individuals.

In keeping with this analysis, national studies of charitable giving find that whereas lower-class individuals often donate to social-service organizations or religious charities, when upper-class individuals give, they prefer to do so to organizations, such as private colleges and universities and cultural institutions (e.g., museums), which predominantly serve the interests of upper-class individuals (Reich, 2013). Of the 50 largest individual gifts to public charities in 2012, the vast majority went to elite educational institutions (e.g., Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Princeton) and arts organizations (e.g., the Metropolitan Museum of Art); not one was directed to a social-service organization or charity that primarily helps the poor (Stern, 2013). This finding in one area of resource allocation (i.e., charitable giving) highlights that upper-class individuals may engage in strategic patterns of resourcing sharing with economically advantaged peers or groups in ways that cause resources to flow upward in the class hierarchy and concentrate at the top.

Our propositions regarding the perceptual processes that maintain economic inequality, as well as the moral and relational routes to inequality maintenance, both hint at some reasons why resources flow upward in cross-class interactions. Perceptually, signs of lower-class identity will elicit stereotypes of lower-class individuals as incompetent and untrustworthy, which make these individuals risky beneficiaries of others' generosity. In the moral and relational realm, upper-class individuals are likely to think more strategically about the impact of their generosity, even considering the ways in which such gifts could enhance their own power, influence, and reputation (Côté, House, & Willer, 2015; Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Whillans, Caruso, & Dunn, 2017). As a result of these processes occurring during cross-class interactions, resources will tend to flow upward, thereby contributing to the maintenance of economic inequality.

New research is in keeping with this analysis: cross-class interactions and signals of class identity give rise to strategic resource sharing that exacerbates inequality. In one experiment, researchers created miniature online societies involving repeated economic exchanges to assess patterns of resource sharing among participants over time (Nishi, Shirado, Rand, & Christakis, 2015).

Participants were given either a relatively large initial endowment to play the game or a small endowment and were randomly assigned to societies with varying levels of economic inequality, ranging from being equal to highly unequal. The degree to which resources (i.e., wealth) in the society were visible or invisible was also manipulated, which maps onto our discussion of the signs and salience of social class group identity. In societies in which individuals' resources were visible to participants, initial inequality begat even greater inequality: rich participants shared with other resource-rich individuals—that is, with individuals in their same economic group, which led to greater downstream inequality in the society. However, when resources were invisible, participants shared regardless of their partners' resources, which reduced inequality (Nishi et al., 2015). In other work along these lines, higher-income individuals behaved less generously than lower-income individuals when residing in highly unequal, vs equal, areas or when reading information portraying their state as having high, vs low, inequality (Côté et al., 2015). In effect, when group identities between the haves and the have-nots are made salient, economic resources are differentially allocated in ways that concentrate resources among the wealthy.

These findings illustrate a corollary of the general hypothesis that we are advancing here: Economic inequality may cause valued resources to flow upward in the class hierarchy. Research in this vein should explore whether economic inequality causes social class identity to become a more visible and salient heuristic by which individuals are socially perceived, categorized, grouped, and regarded (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). That is, would people explicitly signal their own wealth as a means to access community resources? We reason that the more salient the group identities during cross-class interactions, the more likely they are to elicit the strategic patterns of resource sharing we have described—concentrating and consolidating not only wealth but also access to valued social and structural resources (e.g., educational and professional opportunities) among those at the top of the social class hierarchy.

8.3 Hypothesis XIII: Cross-Class Interactions Heighten the Likelihood of Class Conflict

A central tenet of our inequality maintenance model is that psychological processes undergirding cross-class interactions sow the seeds of class conflict. Given the perceptual processes we reviewed earlier, social class identities are made especially salient during cross-class interactions and thus increase the likelihood that lower-class individuals will be the subject of unfavorable

stereotypes, social comparison processes, and resource exchanges. Here, we contend that chronically being on the unfavorable end of cross-class exchanges will heighten tendencies for class conflict among lower-class individuals.

Several indirect lines of evidence support this prediction. For example, incidence of violent crime (e.g., rape, murder) is the highest in major metropolitan areas where income inequality is the highest, even when controlling for population density, percentage of residents in poverty, family composition, and racial composition (Blau & Blau, 1982; Enamorado, López-Calva, Rodríguez-Castelán, & Winkler, 2016), patterns that speak to a specific association between inequality and aggression. Some of the clearest evidence of our last hypothesis comes from laboratory experiments where relevant social class comparisons are used as means for shifting temporary perceptions of position in the social class hierarchy. In this work, a simple reminder that one compares unfavorably to the economic circumstances of others is enough to heighten hostile affect, intentions, and behaviors that are likely to exacerbate class conflict. In one study, participants made to feel temporarily lower in social class attributed more hostile feelings and behaviors to ambiguous vignettes (e.g., waiting inordinately long for service at a restaurant), relative to participants made to feel higher in social class (Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011). In more recent experimental work, participants who were manipulated to feel lower in social class expressed more state and behavioral hostility toward the experimenter (i.e., by giving her/him more negative evaluations) than did participants manipulated to feel higher in social class (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016).

A provocative field study documents a similar effect of reminders of wealth disparities on class conflict. In this research, Decelles and Norton (2016) examined the occurrence of "air rage"—incidence of abusive, unruly, or antagonizing behavior—on airline flights based on the entry of passengers and the existence of a first class cabin. The authors reasoned that the presence of a first class cabin would signal economic inequality and increase the salience for lower-class "economy" passengers of their relatively disadvantaged status compared to their upper-class "first class" counterparts. Interestingly, if economy passengers boarded a flight that included a first class cabin, and entered the airplane through the first class cabin, their odds of air rage were higher than if they were on flights without first class cabins or boarding from the rear of the plane—thus avoiding reminders of their relative disadvantage (Decelles & Norton, 2016). Together, these laboratory

and field studies suggest that by making perceptions of one's social class identity vis-à-vis others salient, cross-class interactions engender unfavorable perceptual and social exchanges that elicit hostility and potentially conflict on the part of lower-class individuals.

Just as cross-class interactions incite aggression and hostility among lower-class individuals, they are likely to elicit similar patterns of conflict among upper-class individuals. In our first proposition, we detailed how structural barriers of threat, scarcity, and access to valued networks sharply divide upper- and lower-class environments. These class disparities are readily apparent in the ways in which society is divided along social class lines. People with different education and earnings live in increasingly segregated neighborhoods, socialize in different clubs, attend different schools, shop at different stores, eat different foods, receive different kinds of medical care, and even drive on different roads (Avila, 2014; Domhoff, 1998; McPherson et al., 2001). People also strongly identify with their social class (Destin et al., 2017), and as we argued, they are more likely to work and socialize with people from their same social class (McPherson et al., 2001; Schwartz, 2013). Segregated spaces are likely to elicit processes of ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration that will lead to class conflict when any class boundaries are crossed (Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014). In the case of upper-class individuals, we predict that class conflict behaviors will emerge in the service of maintaining segregated spaces and perpetuating disparities in economic and social resources.

Several lines of evidence support our prediction that upper-class individuals engage in class conflict-related behaviors to protect their economic and social resource advantages. In research on group formation, competition over scarce resources is one of the primary elicitors of group conflict (Bobo, 1983; Sherif, 1961). And given our earlier theorizing about heightened political access among upper-class individuals, it is perhaps unsurprising to find evidence for class conflict through state-mediated channels: For instance, the criminal justice system in the United States protects upper-class people from more economically disadvantaged individuals. As income inequality has risen, disparities in the targets of policing and criminal prosecution have, too. Although the United States has experienced a 44% decrease in violent crime over the last 20 years, the prison population during that same period has more than doubled, consisting predominantly of Black and poor Americans (Noah, 2014; Taibbi, 2014). White collar crimes—of which there has been a proliferation in recent years—are both prosecuted and punished less severely than blue collar crimes (Matsueda & Grigoryeva, 2014). Moreover, archival data indicate a

propensity for upper-class individuals to engage in aggression in the service of maintaining their heightened share of economic and social resources. An analysis of 3.9 million citizens of the confederacy found that wealthy families, and particularly families who owned slaves, were more likely to serve in the confederate army than their poorer and nonslave-owning counterparts (Hall, Huff, & Kuriwaki, 2017). Together, these observations and findings support the notion that threats to the economic status quo cause upper-class individuals to engage in class-related aggression and conflict.

It will be important to examine whether upper-class individuals' motivations to protect their own economic advantage heighten their tendencies toward class conflict in various forms—by advocating for disproportionately severe prosecution of the lower class in the criminal justice system (e.g., Taibbi, 2014), aggressing against lower-class individuals in interpersonal interactions (e.g., Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2008), opposing policies and efforts aimed toward wealth redistribution (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015), or blocking government-sponsored aid to the poor (e.g., Hacker & Pierson, 2010). A second area worthy of empirical study is the psychological and behavioral consequences of *perceived* class conflict. For example, mere perceptions of class conflict—e.g., as assessed via self-reports of perceived disagreements between the rich and the poor—may cause lower-class individuals to be less likely to seek out cooperative and beneficial relationships with upper-class individuals that would enable their advancement in the social class hierarchy, further solidifying class boundaries and perpetuating inequality (e.g., Côté et al., 2017).

In sum, in this fifth and final proposition, we have argued that when class-based group identities are made salient in cross-class interactions, they create barriers to cross-class affiliation, facilitate unequal resource sharing, and trigger conflict between the social classes, which heighten segregation and disparities between the haves and have-nots of society. In this fashion, upper-class individuals go beyond beliefs that justify and legitimize the hierarchies they benefit from to engaging in behaviors that facilitate the upward flow of resources, segregate social spaces by class, and further undermine the advancement opportunities of their lower-class counterparts.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: ENVISIONING A FAIRER SOCIETY

The model we have provided in this chapter is a sobering reminder of the remarkable staying power of economic inequality and class division. Our conceptual analysis and empirical review brings into focus a novel and rather

bleak portrait of class hierarchy: Psychological processes that naturally arise from social class differences further reinforce economic inequality and class disparities. Even hierarchies based on unfair or unjust distributions of resources are difficult to change.

There is, however, also reason for optimism. Research is gaining ever more robust purchase upon understanding the causal mechanisms that underlie the maintenance of economic inequality. This bodes well for understanding ways in which scientists, citizens, and policymakers can participate in the reshaping of society and the creation of fairer economic systems. Here, we review some of these pressing future directions from the perspective of social psychology, a viewpoint not often brought to bear upon these considerations. Our inequality maintenance model yields several promising points of intervention. We examine how to increase economic inequality by: (1) reducing structural barriers of threat, scarcity, and access to valued networks; (2) shifting ideologies of merit; (3) fostering more egalitarian moral–relational tendencies; and (4) contending with group-based determinants of economic inequality.

Optimistically, there has been a recent and continuing groundswell of interest in issues of economic inequality in the social sciences and society, and our laboratory group's interest in the topic of social class is but one sign of this rising tide. As shown in Fig. 2, according to Google's Ngram tool—an online search engine that charts frequencies of terms and words found in print sources—mentions of economic inequality and related terms have increased in English language books from 1800 to 2008, controlling for the number of books. It would seem that more people than ever before are interested in and writing about the causes, consequences, and correlates of widening economic disparities between individuals in society.

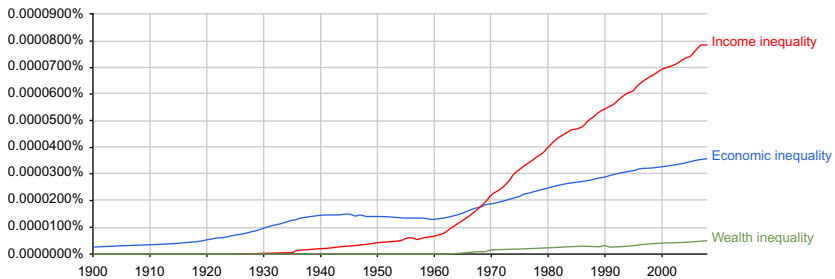

Fig. 2 A Google Ngram graph depicting the growing proportion of mentions of economic inequality, income inequality, and wealth inequality from 1900 to 2008 in the entire corpus of English language books on Google, controlling for the number of books in the corpus.

Despite this growing interest in economic inequality, people's perceptions of the real economic conditions that individuals experience remain positively biased; people view economic inequality as far less severe than is actually the case (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton & Kiatpongsan, 2013; Shariff et al., 2016). This is a pattern that should decline over time, as interest in economic inequality continues to rise and as people become increasingly aware of class disparities. One encouraging insight arises when examining people's preferences for levels of societal wealth inequality. In that research, as we have described, people prefer more rather than less equal societies—that is, smaller pay differences between CEOs and unskilled factory workers, and more equal distribution of resources between the income quintiles (e.g., Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton & Kiatpongsan, 2013). Rising awareness of inequality and widely held values toward greater equality should motivate increased collective efforts to combat inequality in its many forms.

It will be important to better understand the psychological processes that underlie inequality perceptions. How do people understand and construe the levels of inequality around them—is it through exposure to inequality in their local environment and extended social networks (e.g., Côté et al., 2015), their knowledge of relevant statistics (Norton & Ariely, 2011), their ideological and moral commitments (e.g., Graham et al., 2012), their social upbringing, a confluence of these and other processes? And how do people's perceptions of economic inequality shape their motivations and behaviors surrounding it? Individual awareness of economic inequality may be a necessary but insufficient condition for inequality-reducing intentions. Values and norms (e.g., fairness), institutional and intergroup processes (e.g., discrimination, conflict), and macroeconomic factors such as the state of the economy should also play a role. These open and pressing questions promise to be fertile areas of future inquiry.

9.1 Fostering Equality by Reducing Structural Barriers of Threat, Scarcity, and Access to Valued Networks

Of course, moving from egalitarian motivations to actually building a society with (more) evenly distributed resources requires other conditions. Comprehensive interventions that take into account the structural barriers between the rich and the poor, reviewed in our first proposition, are likely to be fruitful (Kraus & Park, 2017; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). We have described how social institutions that create social and survival-related

threats, environments of scarcity, and privileged access to valued networks increase inequality. Policy changes that include increases in the minimum wage (Smith, 2012) or the provision of a universal basic income (Woodbury, 2015)—both contentious topics in social and political debates of the day—are clear and viable routes toward improving the lives of the poor and working class by mitigating their experiences of scarcity (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014). With respect to networks of cumulative disadvantage, our theoretical analysis suggests that large-scale government programs—like the child learning provided by public broadcasting—can raise the level of educational enrichment for children from lower-class backgrounds (Lazarus & Mora, 2000). Similarly, analyses reveal great inequality in the K-12 education system, where many students do not receive equal access to high quality education or even lunches (Shedd, 2015). Policies that intervene on these educational inequalities can provide a path toward a more mobile and more equitable society.

On this topic, there is already some indirect evidence highlighting the impact of reducing structural barriers of threat and access. In the United States, where educational institutions place lower-class individuals into substandard educational contexts early in life, genetic similarity only predicts intelligence among upper-class individuals—presumably because these individuals live and learn within social networks that allow them to flourish and express their genes (Nisbett, 2009; Tucker-Drob & Bates, 2016; Turkheimer, 2000). In contrast, in countries where uniform quality education is available to all members of society (e.g., Western Europe and Australia), intelligence is heritable for people across the class spectrum (Tucker-Drob & Bates, 2016). Together, these results indicate that reducing experiences of threat among lower-class individuals may be a key factor in allowing individuals across the class spectrum to achieve their full potential for economic advancement in society.

Class-based psychological interventions that combat threat-based inequalities in institutions are a growing topic of research. For example, fostering a sense of belonging within institutions can help reduce class achievement gaps by minimizing the extent to which lower-class individuals experience threat and devaluation, and increasing their trust in others and their institutions. One set of studies indicates that providing a warm and supportive academic climate for first-generation college students improves their academic outcomes, relative to typical university climates (Browman & Destin, 2016). Another set of studies found that exposure to a panel of students who describe the extra challenges they face as students who are the first in their family to attend college improves first-generation student

achievement outcomes over several semesters (Stephens et al., 2014). Institutional and social signals of inclusion, respect, warmth, and acceptance minimize experiences of threat among lower-class individuals and foster environments that promote their achievement and success.

How positive achievement trajectories among lower-class individuals shape the perceptual processes we detailed in our second proposition, including the potential reduction of unfavorable stereotype associations with lower-class students, is a topic of future research. For example, an individual from a lower-class background who attends and excels in an elite institution may bear markers of higher social class (e.g., academic pedigree, linguistic cues, sartorial symbols, and tastes) and, as a result, avoid triggering negative stereotypes and distancing motivations among upper-class individuals.

Alleviating structural barriers that undermine achievement and advancement in professional contexts can be accomplished by instilling in organizations values of class diversity, increasing their willingness to hire candidates from lower-class backgrounds and, thus, enhancing lower-class individuals' access to valued networks of opportunity and influence. Moreover, informing lower-class individuals that a given institution values class diversity may significantly decrease their experiences of threat within that organization (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Diltmann, & Crosby, 2008), but it is critical that the information be authentic and verifiable. We find it heartening that recent research in organizational behavior indicates that gender and racial diversity is optimal for improving team collective intelligence (Woolley & Malone, 2011) and that discrimination harms an organization's economic performance (Pager & Shepherd, 2008; see also Burns, 2012). These studies suggest that organizations should be more eager than ever to diversify their work environments and improve lower-class access to valued networks, which, we predict, will lead to greater challenging of the status quo among social groups and their individual members.

Increasing access and opportunity for lower-class individuals in education and work life will also increase the degree of meaningful cross-class contact—interpersonal contact between individuals from different social classes during collaborative and equal status settings with collective goals in mind (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). As decades of research on intergroup relations attest, meaningful cross-class contact should be an effective avenue toward increasing positivity between social class groups, reducing conflict, and rendering current class-based stereotypes obsolete by exposing people to class-based stereotype disconfirming events (Rothbart & John, 1985). Cross-class contact may also shift, in fundamental ways, how people construe the social class hierarchy, and promote more

inclusive forms of social categorization as a function of social class (i.e., by rendering individuals less likely to categorize individuals from different social classes as outgroups; Brewer & Gaertner, 2001).

9.2 Combating Ideologies of Merit to Foster Increased Equality

Our analysis of how ideologies of merit underpin economic inequality also points toward paths for intervention, particularly with regards to people's beliefs about social class disparities as being fair and deserved. Recent work suggests that what drives much of the discomfort with inequality is the unfairness implied by wide discrepancies in resources (Day & Fiske, 2017; Starmans et al., 2017). That is, fairer hierarchies with unequal distributions tend to be perceived as more acceptable and justified, and presumably less likely to elicit social class conflicts. This insight offers an important potential way forward toward reducing inequality—highlighting the current economic system as being unmerited or unfair. Given that heightened perceptions of social mobility are linked to increased tolerance for economic inequality (Shariff et al., 2016), awareness of a widespread lack of social mobility in society is likely to elicit greater intolerance of inequality and perceptions of undeservingness, which, we predict, will heighten motivations to change the current economic system. In related work, having participants see society as low in social mobility reduced participants' support for the status quo, and it did so equally for those at the top and bottom of the social class hierarchy (Day & Fiske, 2017).

Future experiments in this vein should explore ways that highlighting the continued unfairness of economic systems undermines ideologies of merit, triggers intolerance of the economic status quo, and motivates efforts to change it. For example, reminders of how luck and legacy play into the determinants of success (Davidai & Gilovich, 2016; Frank, 2016; Kraus et al., 2009), or of structural barriers to lower-class advancement (e.g., a low minimum wage), may increase willingness to afford lower-class individuals increased opportunities for upward social mobility in the provision of increased government-sponsored aid, better healthcare, and better access to quality education and jobs.

9.3 Moral and Relational Roots of Equality

Our analysis of the moral–relational determinants of economic inequality should make researchers skeptical of Noblesse Oblige, or the presumed

nobility of the rich. Indeed, the studies we cite here often find that support for the economic status quo is consistently strongest for those whose status has benefited from the current economic system and who might be threatened by changes to that system (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Lowery et al., 2007). Moreover, upper-class individuals behave in more self-interested and status-seeking ways that enhance their individual status while undermining the advancement of others (e.g., Kraus, Piff, et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, et al., 2012).

Findings in psychological science, however, are suggestive of ways in which upper-class individuals might be motivated to redistribute resources in a more egalitarian fashion. For instance, when the behavior of upper-class individuals is more public, they tend to behave in more prosocial fashion to earn reputational benefits (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016). Namely, users on Twitter—a public online messaging platform—who tweeted about a prosocial fundraising campaign for ALS tended to be upper class (as indexed by their occupational prestige), and follow-up experiments revealed that their proclivity to support the fundraising campaign was motivated by wanting to boost their social reputation (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016). Other research underscores the role of class differences in independent vs interdependent values in motivating generosity: upper-class participants (indexed using income and net-worth) behaved more generously in response to a charitable request that emphasized agency and personal goals (e.g., what each person can do individually to reduce poverty), whereas lower-class individuals were more generous when the request emphasized communion and shared goals (e.g., what all of us can do together to reduce poverty; Whillans et al., 2017).

Class differences in the goals and motivations underlying helping and sharing (e.g., reputational concerns and values) could be leveraged in philanthropic, professional, and political settings to mitigate economic inequality in society. For example, increasing opportunities for upper-class individuals to signal their generosity, particularly to charities that service the poor, may increase their willingness to contribute and, in turn, lead to more egalitarian forms of sharing. Moreover, although policy endorsements and voting behavior are often made in private, creating more public opportunities for upper-class individuals to signal egalitarian virtues in the policies and platforms they espouse may increase their efforts to combat the economic status quo.

9.4 Contending With Group-Based Processes That Perpetuate the Class Divide

A number of barriers make meaningful contact between people of different class backgrounds challenging and beset by obstacles, including geographic separation, cultural differences, interpersonal anxiety, and class conflict. As described earlier, increasing access and opportunity among lower-class individuals in academic, professional, and social contexts should not only minimize their experiences of threat, but also lead to decreased physical and social separation between the social classes and enhance meaningful cross-class contact. Cross-class contact, we propose, is a particularly viable avenue toward facilitating understanding and cooperation across the class divide and upending class divisions.

One reason why is that cross-class contact enhances perspective taking, or imagining how another person is thinking and feeling, which can improve empathy, compassion, and intergroup cooperation (e.g., Coke, Batson, & Mcdavis, 1978; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Underwood & Moore, 1982). In one laboratory study, community participants of varying income levels were exposed to a compassion-inducing video depicting images of others' suffering—which served as a fleeting reminder of the needs of others in the world around them—and following this video had a chance to help a distressed experiment partner. Though lower-income respondents helped more than upper-income ones in the control condition, the compassion-inducing video elicited similarly high rates of helping among all individuals across the income spectrum (Piff et al., 2010). Finding the conditions necessary to elicit perspective taking for others who come from different neighborhoods, economic circumstances, social spaces, and family traditions is a daunting but pressing challenge. Future investigations should explore how prolonged interdependent contact with others (e.g., Aronson & Patnoe, 2011), explicit training programs during adolescence that expose individuals to socioeconomically diverse others (e.g., Chandler, 1973), or participation in diverse summer camps and sports leagues enhance perspective taking and, ultimately, promote understanding, compassion, and cooperation across social class boundaries.

Finally, a full understanding of economic inequality demands unwavering attention to racial economic disparities. Race relations have improved from the 1950s to 2000s, as norms for expressing overt racism have decreased over that time period (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Perhaps because of these trends and the salience of high status Black exemplars

(e.g., LeBron James, Oprah Winfrey, and Beyonce Knowles), it might be easy for one to assume that race-based economic outcomes have improved as well, when in fact they have not. In Fig. 3, we plot race inequalities using data available from the Current Population Survey. We find race-based economic inequalities that persist across at least five domains of economic standing—employer-provided health benefits, high school and college wages, accumulated wealth, and annual income. It is unsurprising that racial economic inequalities existed in the past, but what is perhaps unsettling is that these inequalities persist today despite recent improvements in race relations in the United States (e.g., Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017; Richeson & Sommers, 2016).

These data underscore the complex intersections that exist between race and social class, and research is beginning to uncover how these connections may contribute to economic inequality in society. For instance, a recently published examination of social class self-identification in the General Social Survey found that Black Americans define social class less in terms of economic indicators like income, education, and occupation status than do their White, Asian, and Latino American counterparts (Cohen, Shin, Lu,

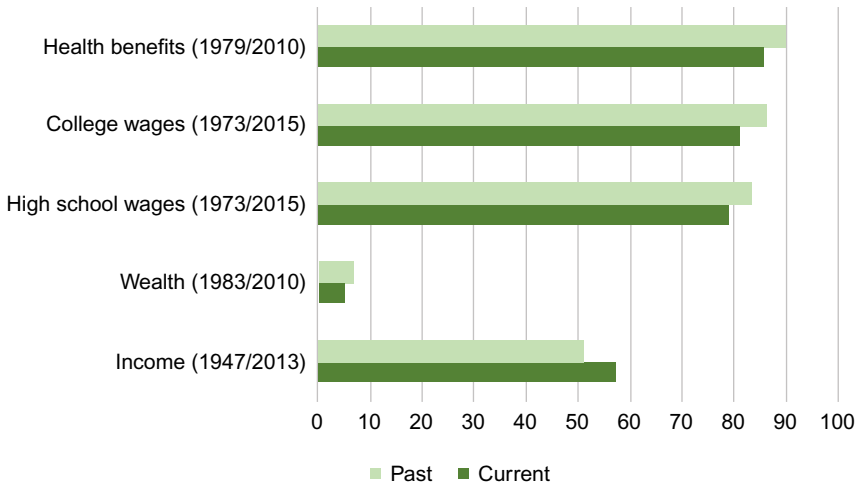

Fig. 3 Proportions of racial economic inequality between Black and White Americans in employer provided health benefits, college wages, high school wages, accumulated wealth, and annual income based on data from the Current Population Survey. The data are scaled so that a score of 100 indicates equality between Black and White Americans, whereas scores below 100 (e.g., 80) indicate that for every $100 a White family earns in income, a Black family earns the amount shown.

Ondish, & Kraus, 2017). These data indicate that economic standing does not factor into Black Americans' perceptions of their own societal status to the degree it does for other groups, and signal that race may shape the extent that people derive social status benefits from their own economic standing (Cohen et al., 2017). In the same data, low-income White Americans reported feeling lower in social class than they did in the 1970s (Cohen et al., 2017). Although these changes are likely determined by multiple social and psychological forces, research on American demographic diversity indicates that as the country becomes more racially diverse, White Americans in general, and low-income White Americans in particular, are likely to fear a loss of economic and social opportunities to other racial groups (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014). How countrywide demographic changes impact perceptions of social class among White Americans, along with their experience of cross-race conflict, is an important topic of future inquiry.

There is also reason to believe that racial inequalities are a root cause of general wealth inequality in society, because current and previous societal laws (e.g., redlining and chattel slavery) served to drive economic rewards from the hands of Black individuals and other ethnic minorities into the hands of wealthy Whites. In this fashion, economic policies that target racial wealth gaps may be particularly well suited to reducing economic inequality in society more broadly (Darity, 2005).

Awareness of racial economic inequality can also increase awareness of the unfairness inherent in economic systems more broadly; that wide and persistent racial disparities in economic outcomes exist between White and Black people in similar circumstances with similar educations indicates that the economic status quo unfairly rewards Whites at the expense of other groups. Of course, the capacity for awareness of racial inequality to affect real and lasting change necessitates that people continue to bravely and openly discuss current race relations in society, though these conversations—like conversations about social class—are fraught with discomfort and potential for misunderstanding (Richeson & Shelton, 2006; Richeson & Sommers, 2016).

10. CONCLUSION

Economic inequality is a perennial, pervasive, and permanent feature of modern social living. Through structural, perceptual, ideological, moral–relational, and intergroup means, disparities between the haves and

have-nots endure and intensify, despite mounting evidence of their pernicious social effects. In this review, we have outlined the psychological processes that contribute to the maintenance of economic inequality and render it so impervious to change. A better understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate economic inequality also illuminates the ways in which it can be reversed.

As we close this chapter, we are heartened that the scientific discourse surrounding economic inequality is intensifying, and that social psychologists are playing a vital role in this dialog. We are collectively hopeful about the promise of this research as well as the progress that researchers are poised to make in building on this model in the next decade. A fairer society is within reach.

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