Social Class, Essentialism, and Restorative Policy Decisions

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Psychology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2010
Abstract

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Social class (socioeconomic status, SES) is a primary determinant of rank in the human social hierarchy, and in the present research I examined lay theories about social class categories and their implications for social policy. Lay theories about social categories (e.g., race, sexual orientation) differ to the extent that they are essential—based on internal, inherent, and stable characteristics—or socially constructed. Theory and research argue that high-ranking individuals in society justify their elevated positions by endorsing essentialist beliefs (Keller, 2005), and that individuals of upper social class—experiencing elevated control and freedom of choice—explain their social world in terms of stable, internal states, rather than external social forces (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). Following from this analysis, I tested the predictions that upper-class individuals would be more likely to endorse essentialist lay theories of social class categories relative to lower-class individuals, and that class-based patterns in essentialist lay theories would explain differences in restorative social policy judgments—focused on protecting vulnerable groups, or rehabilitation-based punishments—among upper- and lower-class individuals.

Three studies bore out these predictions. In Study 1, participants with elevated subjective socioeconomic rank tended to endorse essentialist theories of social class categories, relative to lower-class rank participants. Moreover, this class-based essentialist tendency explained why upper-class individuals opposed more restorative policies providing education opportunities, ensuring tax relief for poorer people, protecting voting rights, and endorsing rehabilitation-based punishments. In Study 2, participants were manipulated to receive information suggesting that social class was an essentialist social category opposed restorative policies (e.g., mandatory ethics seminars) for individuals caught cheating in an academic setting, relative to participants manipulated to perceive social class as a social construction. Finally, in Study 3, participants manipulated to experience a momentary increase in their relative socioeconomic rank became more likely to endorse essentialist theories of social class categories and, as a result, tended to favor restorative forms of punishment for financial crimes. The implications for understanding how beliefs about the malleability of social class can shape public policies toward social mobility and perpetuate current social inequality are discussed.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many individuals whose ideas and assistance were instrumental in completing this dissertation. First, I would like to express my appreciation for the advice of my Dissertation Chair, Dacher Keltner, for his indispensable advice over the years in shaping what has become a growing theoretical conceptualization of social hierarchy that will no doubt guide my future research on the construct for years to come. Second, my gratitude also goes to Serena Chen, my primary advisor in graduate school, who has not only directly contributed to the ideas in this work, but has more than anyone, taught me the skills necessary to become a successful researcher. Third, I would like to thank Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton and Cameron Anderson for their help in formulating the ideas found in this dissertation, and for providing invaluable career and professional advice throughout this process.

This research was also completed with the help of all the wonderful graduate students of the Berkeley Social Interaction Laboratory and the Self, Identity, and Relationships Laboratory. In particular, my collaborations with Paul Piff and Liz Horberg have been critical for the development of the ideas in this research. As well, I thank Cheryl Kang for her assistance in carrying out the studies included here. I would also like to express my gratitude to the American Psychological Association and the National Institute of Health for funding portions of this research. Finally, I would like to thank my spouse, Christina, my parents, and the rest of my family for both supporting and inspiring my intellectual growth throughout the dissertation process.
Social Class, Essentialism, and Restorative Policy Decisions

In humans and many nonhuman species, important social outcomes are determined by an individual’s rank within the social hierarchy. Among nonhuman species, a high-ranking individual receives first access to meals or mating opportunities (e.g., Sapolsky, Alberts, & Altmann, 1997). Among humans, rank organizes group behavior around the goals of high-ranking individuals, provides high-ranking individuals with the necessary resources to lead healthy, happy lives, and affords high-ranking individuals behaviors that maximize their potential, ensure the survival of their genes, and maintain their status at the top of the social hierarchy (e.g., Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008).

The most pervasive and reliable signal of rank in human society is a person’s place in the socioeconomic hierarchy—that is, a person’s social class, socioeconomic status, or SES (Bourdieu, 1985). Elevated social class rank provides an individual with freedom of choice (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007) and access to abundant resources (Oakes & Rossi, 2003), and fosters perceptions that one has control and freedom in social life (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). In contrast, diminished social class rank tends to focus individuals on the uncertain and uncontrollable external social forces that impact their life outcomes and constrain their choices (e.g., Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). In the present research, we examine how differences in social class rank impact essentialist beliefs about social class categories—that is, beliefs that social class rank has an underlying, inherent, or natural foundation—and in turn, how essentialist beliefs shape social policy decisions.

Essentialist Beliefs About Social Class

Essentialist lay theories render differences between social categories of people as inherent, stable, and unchangeable (Allport, 1954; N. Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Keller, 2005; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schandron, 1997). In essence, essentialist theories suggest that people belong to the same social category because they share a specific feature in common, that category membership is unchangeable, that categories provide a great deal of accurate information about the individual (Yzerbyt et al., 1997; Keller, 2005), and that members of the same category share similar biological characteristics (e.g., physiological responses, genetically-based traits; Keller, 2005; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). In contrast, a constructivist view of social categories implies that social categories are constructed by outside social influence, that categories are not biologically distinct, and that category membership shifts depending on time and context (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008).

Essentialist theories of social categories form the basis for how people understand the social environment and think about members of out-groups (Keller, 2005); however, research has yet to explore how social class is likely to shape these theories. For my first hypothesis, I predict that individuals with upper-class status will endorse essentialist lay theories of social class categories, whereas lower-class individuals will endorse more constructivist theories (Hypothesis 1). This first prediction arises from two converging theoretical perspectives—the first concerning motivations to justify the social hierarchy, and the second concerning class-based differences in social perception.

Theoretical accounts of essentialism suggest that endorsement of essentialist social categories arises from motivations to justify the current structure of social hierarchy (Keller, 2005; Yzerbyt, Judd, & Corneille, 2004; Morton, Postmes, S. Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009). That
is, beliefs that group characteristics are stable, immutable, and biologically determined help justify in-group favoritism, are useful in explaining disparities in status and rank between different social groups, and help to justify prejudice or discrimination directed toward low-status groups.

Several studies suggest that essentialist beliefs have hierarchy-justifying functions. For example, individuals who endorsed biological essentialism—that is, beliefs that social categories are determined primarily by genetic factors—were more likely to show prejudice and discrimination toward out-groups (Keller, 2005), or low-status minority groups (e.g., gays and lesbians; N. Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). Similarly, people exposed to essentialist beliefs about racial categories tended to more strongly endorse racial inequality in society (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Research also suggests that essentialist beliefs are particularly instrumental in justifying elevated social rank in society. After learning that gender inequality was decreasing, men who endorsed essentialist beliefs also tended to report more sexist attitudes, presumably as a means to maintain their elevated positions in an unstable gender hierarchy. In contrast, men learning that gender inequality was stable showed no such association (Morton, Postmes, S. Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009). These findings suggest that dominant members of society—such as upper-class individuals—are motivated to justify or legitimize their elevated status by endorsing beliefs that group categories are inherent, stable, and immutable. In contrast, subordinate groups in society—such as lower-class individuals—may endorse views that social categories are changeable, unstable, and constructed by the external social environment, possibly to foster beliefs in opportunity for social advancement.

The findings reviewed above dovetail with a second line of theory and research suggesting that class-based essentialist beliefs may also be driven by differences in social perception between upper- and lower-class individuals. The environments of upper-class individuals are characterized by economic and social freedoms, and a lack of personal constraints on individuals’ outcomes (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). As a result, relative to their lower-class counterparts, upper-class individuals are likely to explain social events in their lives as caused or impacted by internal traits and dispositions. In contrast, lower-class individuals’ lives are characterized by economic constraints and a lack of personal agency (Johnson & Krueger, 2005; 2006; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). As a result, these individuals experience potentially threatening and uncertain social environments—unsafe neighborhoods, narrow educational opportunities, transportation difficulties, biased treatment by the criminal justice system—that lead them to explain social events as determined by external, uncontrollable social forces.

Empirical evidence supports the view that upper-class individuals explain their social environments in terms of people’s internal states whereas lower-class individuals explain events as caused by external social forces. For example, research suggests that upper- and lower-class individuals favor cultural products reflecting their respective internal and external foci. In this research, participants with a college education (i.e., upper-class individuals) preferred rock music because the lyrical content of this genre expresses themes related to exercising individual control and freedom, whereas high-school educated participants (i.e., lower-class individuals) preferred country music because of its emphasis on the struggle against the external social environment (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). In other work, upper-class adolescents, identified according to parental income, were more likely to spontaneously describe themselves in terms of their internal thoughts and feelings, whereas lower-class adolescents described themselves in terms of their
material possessions and external activities (Hart & Edelstein, 1992). Moreover, survey research finds that upper subjective SES individuals—assessed by ranking oneself on a 10-rung ladder representing socioeconomic status in society—were more likely to explain personal life events (e.g., being laid off from work) as determined by individual traits and dispositions relative to their lower subjective SES counterparts (Study 3, Kraus et al., 2009).

That upper-class individuals focus on internal traits and dispositions when explaining social events suggests these individuals will endorse essentialist conceptions that define social class categories as inherent, stable, and biologically determined. In contrast, lower-class individuals will conceptualize social class categories in constructivist terms, defining social class as originating from external social forces.

Research on India’s caste system provides initial evidence in support of this first hypothesis. For example, in survey research upper-caste Indians endorsed statements suggesting that their caste membership was fixed at birth, reflecting an essentialist conception of class identity. In contrast, lower-caste Indians were more likely to endorse statements suggesting that their caste membership was a socially acquired identity (Mahalingam, 1998). Similarly, using a brain transplant paradigm involving a hypothetical scenario in which participants imagined the brain of a lower-caste person placed in the head of an upper-caste person and vice versa, lower-caste Indians felt that physical appearance was the sole determining factor of caste status, suggesting that lower-caste Indians believed that social perceptions of physical appearance determine caste status and not internal biology (Mahalingam, 2003).

Social Class, Essentialism, and Restorative Policy Decisions

Previous research suggests that social policy decisions (e.g., voting behavior, punishment decisions) are influenced by self-serving motives (Antaki, 1985; Ross & Sicyol, 1979), political ideologies (Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Jost, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2000), moral judgments (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009), differential definitions of justice (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Carlsmith et al., 2002), emotions (Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Keltner & Haidt, 2001), and religious beliefs (Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985). I extend this work in the current investigation by testing how social class rank in society shapes social policy decisions, based on class differences in essentialist lay theories.

A principle concern of social justice research has been the types of justice that individuals favor. One type, common in the judicial system of the United States (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997), is retributive justice, which focuses primarily on calibrating punishments and policies to be directly proportional to the harm (or good) that individuals engage in (Carlsmith et al., 2002; Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). In contrast, restorative forms of social policy are principally concerned with rehabilitation and atonement; that is, restorative policies focus on rehabilitating vulnerable individuals or offenders, or gearing government action toward assisting those in need (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Marshall, 2003).

Theory and research on essentialist conceptions of social categories suggest that essentialist beliefs are likely to lead to a rejection of restorative social policies. In essence, believing that a person’s unlawful behavior or destitute circumstances are an inherent and stable quality about the person should also covary with beliefs that rehabilitation-based policies, that attempt to change these essential qualities, are likely to be ineffective. Conversely, constructivist beliefs in social categories foster the sense that rehabilitation practices are crucial for changing people’s unlawful actions or negative life circumstances. Research supports this assertion. For
example, people with elevated self-reported essentialist beliefs about racial categories showed patterns consistent with a rejection of restorative justice concerns. That is, participants with elevated race-based essentialism tended to be less outraged by, and less motivated to change, racial inequality in society (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Based on this research, we expected greater endorsement of essentialist beliefs of social class categories to lead to more rejection of restorative social policies (Hypothesis 2).

Just as essentialist beliefs are likely to lead to rejection of restorative social policies, evidence suggests that upper-class individuals are also likely to reject these policies, relative to their lower-class counterparts. Upper-class individuals, who explain outcomes disproportionately in terms of internal dispositions, traits, and attributes, tend to see individuals as more personally responsible for their social positions and actions and, as such, should be less in favor of restorative policies that focus on rehabilitation-based punishments (e.g., community service) or on assisting individuals in need. In contrast, lower-class individuals—whose life outcomes are disproportionately influenced by external social forces—should be more likely to believe that vulnerable groups or individuals who commit crimes have achieved their undesirable status in society through no fault of their own, and that restorative policy can help rehabilitate these individuals.

Research supporting this viewpoint is limited, but suggestive. For example, upper subjective SES individuals explained trends in economic inequality in terms of personal responsibility; that is, favoring explanations that pointed to internal traits and dispositions. In contrast, lower subjective SES individuals were more likely to explain economic inequality in the United States based on external, contextual forces outside of individual control (Studies 1 & 2, Kraus et al., 2009). In essence, whereas upper-class individuals tended to blame individuals for economic advancement or misfortune, lower-class individuals favored explanations of economic inequality that account for uncontrollable contextual forces (e.g., political influence and educational opportunity), and that downplay individual responsibility. That upper-class individuals favored internal explanations of economic inequality suggests these individuals are more likely to reject restorative policies that take a person’s external context into account, relative to lower-class individuals.

Similarly, research suggests that lower-class individuals are more charitable to others. For instance, a study conducted by Independent Sector (2002) found that households earning $100,000 or more contributed only 2.7% of their income to charity, whereas households making under $25,000 contributed 4.2%. That lower-class individuals gave more to charity implies these individuals’ elevated concern for restorative forms of justice, aimed at rehabilitation and repair, relative to their upper-class counterparts. In a similar line of research, individuals with high trait ratings of social power—a construct reflecting a person’s capacity to influence the outcomes of others—reported less investment in a relationship with a stranger and were less compassionate in response to that stranger’s disclosure of suffering (van Kleef, Oveis, van der Löwe, LuoKogan, Goetz, & Keltner, 2008). Although social power and social class are conceptually distinct aspects of a person’s rank in society (Keltner et al., 2003), this finding suggests that upper-class individuals may experience reduced compassion in response to the needs of others, and by implication, may be less motivated to engage in restorative forms of justice.

Based on the above research, I hypothesized that upper-class individuals would be more likely to reject restorative forms of social policy relative to their lower-class counterparts (Hypothesis 3). Moreover, I expected that the relationship between social class and restorative
policy decisions would be explained by class-based differences in essentialist beliefs (Hypothesis 4). That is, beliefs that social class categories are stable, immutable, and biologically determined (rather than socially constructed) would explain why upper-class individuals are more likely to reject restorative forms of social policy.

The Present Research

Three studies tested these predictions about the relationships between social class, essentialist lay theories, and social policy decisions. In Study 1, I sought to determine if social class is associated with essentialist lay theories, and if this association explains upper-class individuals’ tendency to vote against restorative policies that protect individual rights, fund improvements in education, provide tax breaks for the needy, and rehabilitate criminals. In Study 2, I assessed the causal relationship between essentialist lay theories about social class hierarchy and restorative policy decisions. More specifically, I assessed participant preferences to punish cheaters using restorative or retributive punishments after they had been manipulated to endorse essentialist or constructivist lay theories about social class hierarchy. In Study 3, I determined the causal role of social class by manipulating momentary conceptions of socioeconomic rank (e.g., Piff, Kraus, Cote, Cheng, & Keltner, in press), and then assessing participants’ essentialist lay theories about social class and restorative policy decisions. In this study, I expected participants manipulated to experience upper-class rank to be less likely to endorse restorative forms of punishment, and to do so because of their beliefs that social class is an essentialist category, relative to manipulated lower-class rank individuals.

Study 1: Social class, Essentialism, and Voting Behavior

In Study 1, I sought to determine if social class shapes beliefs that social class categories are based on internal essentialist qualities or are socially constructed. Moreover, I sought to determine if class-based essentialism predicts voting behavior among lower- and upper-class individuals. More specifically, I examined whether essentialism would account for the relationship between social class and endorsement of restorative social policies regarding education funding, tax policy, voting rights, and punishment. Moreover, given the correlational nature of our results, I sought to rule out two key alternative explanations of these findings: that the relationships between class, essentialism, and voting behavior would be independent of political orientation and ethnicity. Given that restorative policies are often associated with liberal political orientation (e.g., Roach, 2000), we controlled for political beliefs in our analyses to determine the distinct relationships between social class, essentialist beliefs, and voting behavior independent of political views. In addition, given that ethnic differences in the United States are an important source from which people perceive their rank in the social hierarchy (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002), we sought to determine if social class impacts essentialist beliefs and voting behavior independent of this rank-related construct.

Method

Participants

Participants were 169 adults from a national online sample participating for the opportunity to win small gift certificates to an online retailer. The participants were recruited through advertisements on Craigslist.org, and the website where data was collected was maintained by a public west coast university. Of the 169 participants (age $M = 35.04$), the majority ($n = 112$) were female. Participants self-identified primarily as European American ($n = 112$), Asian American ($n = 27$), other or multiple ethnic groups ($n = 17$), African American ($n = 9$), Native American ($n = 3$), and Latino ($n = 1$). The social class of the sample was also quite
diverse: 42.9% of participants self-reported annual incomes of $50,000 or less, and 39.3% of participants graduated from high school as their highest level of education completed.

**Procedure**

Participants accessed the experiment online, and were first asked to rate their social class based on measures of subjective socioeconomic rank used in previous research (Adler, Epel, Castellazo, & Ickovics, 2000; Kraus et al., 2009). Subsequently, participants filled out information about their beliefs about social class using a measure of essentialism adapted for this research (see Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Finally, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood they would vote yes for a number of social policies if the policies were being voted on that very day. Finally, participants filled out demographic information about themselves, and were debriefed about the hypotheses of the experiment.

**Materials**

**Subjective SES.** Drawing from previous studies of subjective SES, I assessed social class in the present research using a measure of subjective socioeconomic rank. In this measure, participants were given the MacArthur Scale of subjective SES (e.g., Adler et al., 2000). The measure consists of a drawing of a ladder with 10 rungs representing people with different levels of education, income, and occupation status. Participants are instructed to place a large “X” on the rung where they feel they stand relative to other people in their local community in the United States. This ladder assesses personal placement within the participant’s own local community. Each rung of the ladder was given a number between 1 and 10, with higher numbers indicating higher placement on the ladder ($M = 5.89, SD = 1.86$).

**Essentialism.** Using previous scales assessing essentialism (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), I created a scale assessing people’s essentialist beliefs about social class. Essentialist conceptions of social class include believing that social class is easy to determine, that children can be separated into different social class categories, that social class can be determined without clothing cues, and that social class is at least partially biological. Responses were made using 7-point Likert scales ($1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree$). Table 1 displays the items for our scale of essentialism ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.84; \alpha = .81$). Demonstrating the discriminant validity of our scale of essentialist lay theories of social class, the scale was significantly correlated with a measure of general essentialism ($r(167) = .45, p < .01$, (N. Haslam et al., 2000), and uncorrelated with measures of the five factors of the Big Five model of personality, assessed with the Ten Item Personality Inventory ($ps > .23$) (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2002). These analyses indicate that our measure of essentialist beliefs about social class categories was conceptually similar to other measures of essentialism and independent of well-established trait constructs.

**Voting behavior.** For our primary dependent measure, participants were asked to vote on a number of general policy decisions as if they were intending to vote on the decision “right at this moment.” Using methods for assessing political attitudes (Krosnick, 1999), participants made their responses based on 7-point Likert scales reflecting their likelihood of voting yes on the specific policy ($1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely$). Participants voted on policies related to education, taxation, voting rights, and punishment. All items for each of these policy decisions are displayed in Table 2. All policies were scored such that higher scores indicated greater endorsement of principles that reflect restorative justice; that is, greater funding for people in need, tax relief for poor people, more protection of voting rights of felons, and more rehabilitation-based punishment.
Political ideology. To assess political ideology, I collected a single item assessing to what extent people self-identify as liberal or conservative using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative; M = 3.63, SD = 1.67).

Results

Social Class and Essentialism

To examine the hypothesis that upper-class individuals would report essentialist beliefs about social class categories whereas lower-class individuals would report constructivist beliefs, I calculated correlations between participant subjective SES and essentialist lay theories of social class hierarchy. As expected, the correlation was significant, $r(167) = .24, p < .01$, such that upper-class individuals were more likely to believe that social hierarchy is based on people’s internal states, biology, and genes. In contrast, lower-class individuals were more likely to believe that social class hierarchy is not based on internal characteristics, and is instead, socially constructed.

Next, I sought to determine if the relationship between social class and essentialism held after accounting for two variables typically associated with social class: political ideology and ethnicity. To that end, I computed a partial correlation accounting for both political ideology and ethnicity (coded as “1” for European American and “-1” for non-European American). As expected, even when controlling for ethnicity and political ideology, social class was still significantly associated with essentialist conceptions of social hierarchy, $r(165) = .21, p < .01$.

Social Class and Voting Behavior

To examine the hypothesis that upper-class individuals would be more likely to reject restorative social policies, I calculated correlations between participant subjective SES and voting behavior for education, taxation, voting rights, and punishment policies respectively. The results for these analyses can be seen in Table 3. Consistent with the second hypothesis, upper-class individuals tended to show weaker endorsement of restorative policies in their voting behavior, showing a reduced preference for policies that provide funding for low-scoring schools, that give tax relief to poorer people, and that ban punitive punishment practices. Social class was not associated with voting behavior regarding voter rights.

Next, I combined all the policies into a single measure ($\alpha = .67$) to determine if upper-class individuals rejected more restorative social policies in their voting decisions across domains. As Table 3 shows, this was the case, as across voting domains, upper-class individuals tended to oppose restorative social policies, relative to their lower-class counterparts.

Essentialism Explains the Relationship Between Social Class and Voting Behavior

The final hypotheses held that essentialist beliefs would be associated with rejecting restorative social policies and that the relationship between upper social class and rejection of restorative social policies would be explained by class-based patterns of essentialism. To that end, I conducted a mediational analysis using subjective SES as the independent variable, the overall measure of voting behavior as the dependent variable, and essentialism as a mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Moreover, in this analysis I controlled for effects of political orientation and ethnicity to determine social class’s unique impact on voting behavior independent of these constructs.

The analysis, using a series of linear regressions, is summarized in Figure 1. I first predicted the mediator with subjective SES, political ideology, and ethnicity. As expected, I found a significant relationship between essentialism and social class, $t(165) = 2.78, p < .01$, such that upper-class individuals had greater essentialist conceptions of social class hierarchy. In
addition, people who were more conservative also showed greater essentialist conceptions of social hierarchy, $\beta = .15$, $t(165) = 2.04, p < .05$. No other effects were significant.

I next predicted the dependent variable with subjective SES, political ideology, and ethnicity entered in step 1, and our measure of essentialism entered in step 2. The step 1 analysis revealed a significant relationship between social class and restorative policy decisions such that upper-class individuals tended to reject more restorative social policies in their voting behavior, $t(165) = -2.02, p < .05$. In addition, both European Americans, $\beta = -.15, t(165) = -2.17, p < .05$, and conservatives, $\beta = -.46, t(165) = -6.72, p < .01$, showed a tendency to oppose restorative policies in their voting behavior. In step 2, we found the predicted relationship between endorsement of greater essentialist beliefs of social class categories and rejection of restorative policy decisions, $t(164) = -2.20, p < .05$. Moreover, when accounting for this association, the originally significant relationship between subjective SES and restorative policy decisions became non-significant, $t(164) = -1.53, p = .13$. Using a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; 2008), the 95% confidence interval of the effect of social class on voting behavior through essentialism ranged from .01 to .05, suggesting a significant indirect effect.

Discussion

In Study 1, I found that upper-class individuals are more likely, relative to their lower-class counterparts, to endorse essentialist beliefs about social class categories. That is, whereas upper-class individuals tend to believe that a person’s membership in a particular social class has a basis in the internal, biological, and genetic components of a person, lower-class individuals are more likely to think that social class is a socially constructed category, based on external circumstances. Moreover, upper-class individuals tended to make voting decisions based on their essentialist beliefs: upper-class individuals tended to oppose policies that were restorative with regard to education funding, taxation, and punishment, relative to their lower-class counterparts, and these voting patterns were explained by class differences in essentialist beliefs. Finally, the relationships between social class, essentialism, and voting behavior held even after accounting for two constructs that covary with both social class and voting behavior: political ideology and ethnicity. Conservatives and European Americans were more likely to reject restorative policies, but these relationships were independent of social class.

Study 1 provided evidence for our overall model of social class, essentialism, and public policy decisions. Given the correlational approach I used in Study 1, in Study 2, I attempt to extend what is known about essentialism and restorative policy-making by testing the causal association between essentialist beliefs about social class hierarchy and punishment decisions regarding cheating in an academic institution.

Study 2: Essentialist Beliefs about Social Class and Punishment for Academic Cheating

In Study 2, building upon the correlational evidence presented in Study 1, I manipulated essentialist beliefs about social class categories based on past work (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), and assessed the impact of this manipulation on participants’ restorative policy decisions toward academic cheating. In addition, I assessed participants’ endorsement of policy decisions reflecting more retributive punishments, with the prediction that essentialist beliefs about social class hierarchy would only impact restorative policy decisions, because of the focus of restorative policies on the impact of external social forces on individuals’ behavior.

Method

Participants
Sixty-nine undergraduates took part in the study at a public west coast university in exchange for course credit. Participants were primarily female (n = 41) and the largest ethnic group was Asian American (n = 29), followed by European American (n = 22), Latino/a (n = 3), and the rest self-identified as other or multiple ethnicities (n = 15).

Materials and Procedure

Participants arrived at the study in groups of two and were told that the study was about a number of different topics organized by several different researchers in the psychology department. In the first part of the experiment, participants’ memory for and retention of material in scientific articles would be assessed. In the second part of the experiment, participants were instructed that they would fill out a number of measures designed to help understand how people think about a number of campus policies. In the first part of the experiment, participants’ essentialist beliefs about social class categories were manipulated by having them read a scientific article about experimental evidence suggesting research support for or against a biological basis for social class. Following this manipulation, participants were asked to rate a number of general policies they endorsed regarding the punishment of academic cheating. Following these ratings, participants also read three scenarios of people engaging in real cheating behavior, and were asked the likelihood they would render a subset of punishments for that behavior.

Manipulation of essentialist beliefs. Based on previous work (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), I manipulated essentialist beliefs about social class by having participants read two mock scientific journal articles about the biological bases of social class. In the article advocating a biological basis of social class, the article suggested that researchers had uncovered genetic underpinnings to social class, that lower-class children were much more likely to remain lower-class, that lower-class people have genetic similarity to other lower-class people, that social class can be discerned easily, and that people inherit social class from their parents. In the article advocating a social constructivist perspective on social class, the article suggested that there was no genetic basis to social class, that children from lower-class backgrounds were just as likely to become lower- or upper-class, that lower-class people are actually genetically similar to upper-class people, that social class cannot be easily discerned, and that social class is cultural in origin. To determine the success of the manipulation, participants were asked how much they agreed with two statements using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree): “It is impossible to determine one’s social class by examining their genes” and “There is probably a biological determinant of social class.” The first item was reverse scored and the items were averaged (\( M = 2.33, SD = 1.30; \alpha = .73 \)).

Cheating policy decisions. Participants were first asked to indicate how much they endorsed a selection of general cheating policies, and did so by indicating how much they agreed with the policies on 6-point Likert scales (−3 = disagree strongly, 3 = agree strongly). The policies were: “Students caught cheating should be expelled from the University,” “Students caught cheating should be given a failing grade in the course in which they were caught,” “Students suspected of cheating should be subjected to additional scrutiny while taking tests, such as private exam rooms or special exams that are separate from other test takers,” “Professors should be notified of students in their courses who have been suspected of cheating previously, so that they can take appropriate precautions,” and “Students caught cheating should complete 300 hours of community service over a 12-month period.” Of these punishments for
academic cheating, failing the single class was endorsed the most by participants ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.63$).

Next, participants were given three scenarios about cheating behavior and were asked to indicate how much they endorsed specific punishment for the cheating behavior using the same 6-point Likert scale. The three scenarios all described academic cheating during an exam and differed in the extent that the person caught cheating explained their cheating behavior as due to financial hardship, academic pressure arising from medical school applications, or gave no explanation for the cheating. Participants’ ratings did not differ depending on the reason given for cheating in each of the scenarios. Participants indicated how much they agreed with three types of punishments: “The student should receive an F on the exam, and should be expelled from the University,” “The student must attend one-hour weekend seminars for a semester. The seminar will be geared toward understanding the importance of ethics in academic life,” and “The student will have to complete 300 hours of community service over a 12-month period.” Of these punishments for specific academic cheating scenarios, seminars on ethics were endorsed the most strongly ($M = -0.44$, $SD = 1.91$).

Based on social justice research, we divided the cheating policies into two types: restorative punishments and retributive punishments. Research on retributive forms of punishment suggests that punishment should be proportionate to the harm done for a particular transgression and, as such, this type of punishment, employed by our traditional court system, focuses on the severity of punishing people who violate laws (Carlsmith et al., 2002; Carlsmith & Darley, 2006). In contrast, the restorative form focused on rehabilitating and restoring people who violate laws to a law-abiding lifestyle (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Marshall, 1990). Based on these differential conceptions of social justice, I categorized items administering harsh punishments such as surveillance and expulsion as retributive punishment, and I averaged scores for each of these forms of punishment for the general policy decisions and for the three scenarios ($M = -0.83$, $SD = 1.36$; $\alpha = .83$). The remaining items dealing with community service and seminars about ethics were summed into a measure of restorative punishments ($M = -0.78$, $SD = 1.53$; $\alpha = .91$).

Results

Manipulation Check

To determine if our manipulation of essentialist beliefs about social class categories was successful, I subjected the mean of our two essentialism items to an independent samples $t$-test comparing participants manipulated to receive evidence that social class categories were either essentialist or socially constructed. As expected, participants reported more essentialist beliefs after receiving information suggesting that social class was an essentialist category ($M = 2.72$) in comparison to participants receiving information that social class was a social construction ($M = 2.00$), $t(67) = 2.36, p < .05$.

Essentialists Beliefs and Punishment Decisions

Our next aim was to determine if our manipulation of essentialist beliefs of social class categories would impact individuals’ endorsements of restorative punishments for academic cheaters. To that end, we computed a 2 (punishment type) x 2 (essentialist beliefs) mixed model Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with type of punishment as the within-subjects factor. The analysis yielded a significant interaction that can be seen in Figure 2, $F(1, 52) = 6.07, p < .05$. No other effects were significant. As can be seen in the figure, while essentialist beliefs did not change policy decisions for retributive punishment for academic cheating, participants
manipulated to receive information suggesting that social class was an essentialist category showed greater opposition to restorative punishments relative to participants receiving information suggesting that social class was a socially constructed category.

Follow-up analyses support this interpretation of the interaction. No differences emerged when comparing ratings of retributive punishments between participants in the essentialist beliefs condition ($M = -0.66$) to those in the constructivist beliefs condition ($M = -0.97$), $t(67) = 0.36$, $ns$, suggesting that shifts in essentialist beliefs do not impact judgments about the severity of punishments. In contrast, when examining restorative punishments, participants in the essentialist beliefs condition ($M = -1.19$) were more likely to reject restorative punishments like seminars on ethics and community service relative to participants in the constructivist beliefs condition ($M = -0.43$), $t(67) = -2.11$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The results for Study 2 provide new insights into understanding how essentialist beliefs about social class shape policy decision-making. As expected, people manipulated to receive evidence suggesting that social class was an essentialist social category were more likely to reject forms of punishment based on restorative justice principles (Gromet & Darley, 2006); that is, forms of punishment that focus on providing assistance to or rehabilitating people that violate laws. Interestingly, essentialist beliefs did not impact judgments about retributive punishment policy, suggesting that decisions of how severely to punish a person for unlawful action are not shaped by essentialist beliefs of social class categories.

In addition to providing new insights into understanding the types of policy decisions essentialist beliefs are likely to influence, Study 2 also provided the first evidence suggesting that essentialist beliefs about social class are likely to cause changes in policy decisions. In Study 3, I extend the work from the previous studies by showing that manipulating a person’s social class leads to changes in essentialist beliefs about social class categories and in policy judgments related to restorative justice.

Study 3: Manipulated Social Class, Essentialist Beliefs, and Restorative Justice

In Study 3, I extended the findings from the previous studies by manipulating participants’ relative perceptions of their socioeconomic rank. Social class is a complex construct that extends to people’s cultural identity. Social class is intertwined with other processes that include historical factors, shared group identity, and neighborhood effects that are difficult to control for in purely correlational approaches (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Evidence from studies that manipulate social class, therefore, is essential to establish causal relations between social class and essentialist beliefs, and between social class and public policy decisions (Piff et al., in press). As well, manipulating social class is crucial for eliminating potential confounding demographic factors and selection effects that might account for our effects (e.g., social class differences in policy decisions may be driven by differences in urban vs. rural living environments).

Study 3 also extended our current research toward understanding the types of justice procedures lower- and upper-class individuals prefer, as a result of their differences in essentialism. To that end, I assessed participants’ preferences for restorative versus retributive punishments for people breaking laws, based on measures used in previous justice research (Gromet & Darley, 2006). Moreover, based on research suggesting that punishment decisions are based on moral outrage against the actions of perpetrators (e.g., Carlsmith et al., 2002), and the severity of the crime (e.g., Gromet & Darley, 2006), I measured these variables to show that
social class differences in punishment decisions were independent of these justice-relevant constructs. Guided by these concerns, in Study 3 I predicted that participants induced to momentarily experience an elevated sense of their relative social-class rank would experience more essentialist beliefs about social class categories and, in turn, would be more likely to reject restorative justice policies.

Method

Participants

Participants were 161 adult residents of the United States recruited online from a national retail website data collection service in exchange for monetary compensation. The majority of participants (age $M = 36.70$, $SD = 13.55$) were female ($n = 96$) and the majority of participants identified as European American ($n = 128$), followed by Asian American ($n = 15$), other ethnicities ($n = 8$), Latino/a ($n = 5$), Native American ($n = 3$), and African American ($n = 2$).

Procedure

Participants were instructed that the experiment involved answering two types of questions. In the first set of questions, participants would be completing a number of personality measures assessing their feelings about themselves and others. In the second set of questions, participants would be asked to make social judgments about the unlawful behavior of others, and to rate these behaviors on a number of social dimensions. After accessing the survey via a computer terminal, participants engaged in our manipulation of relative social class. The manipulation was followed by several filler measures, our measure of essentialism, adapted to be assessed at this moment, policy decision measures, and measures of demographic information. After completing these measures, participants responded to suspicion probes about the hypothesis of the study, were debriefed and compensated for participation.

Manipulation of Relative Social Class

Adapted from measures of subjective perceptions of socioeconomic rank (Adler et al., 2000; Kraus et al., 2009) and manipulations of relative deprivation (e.g., Callan, Ellard, Shead, & Hodgins, 2008), participants took part in a manipulation of their relative social class (Piff et al., in press). In this manipulation, participants were presented with an image of a ladder with 10 rungs. Participants were instructed to “Think of the ladder above as representing where people stand in the United States.” Participants were then randomly assigned to experience either low or high relative social class based on the following instructions:

“Now, please compare yourself to the people at the very bottom (top) of the ladder. These are people who are the worst (best) off – those who have the least (most) money, least (most) education, and the least (most) respected jobs. In particular, we’d like you to think about how you are different from these people in terms of your own income, educational history, and job status. Where would you place yourself on this ladder relative to these people at the very bottom (top)?”

Participants then placed themselves on the ladder relative to people at the very top or bottom (10 = top rung, 1 = bottom rung; $M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.96$).

After participants placed themselves on the ladder, they were instructed to imagine themselves in a “getting acquainted interaction with one of the people you just thought about from the ladder above.” In particular, participants were instructed to “think about how the differences between you might impact what you would talk about, how the interaction is likely to go, and what you and the other person might say to each other.” Participants were asked to write no more than five sentences. A writing task like this is frequently used in research to activate
rank-related states (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Kraus et al., 2009), and was included here to strengthen the effects of the social-class manipulation.

**Measures**

**Essentialist beliefs about social class.** Participants completed the same measure of essentialism as in Study 1, except the wording of the instructions were changed slightly to reflect participants’ agreement with each statement “at this moment” rather than in general. This change was made to reflect participants’ essentialist beliefs directly following the manipulation of social class rank perceptions. Participants responded to the questions on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; M = 3.94, SD = 0.92; α = .71).

**Policy decisions about punishment.** After completing the measure of essentialism, participants read two counterbalanced scenarios briefly describing a person who was caught committing a financial crime involving either “stealing money from a retail store, or “falsifying corporate financial records to conceal an increase in one’s own annual salary.” No differences emerged between the two types of financial crime. After reading about each scenario, participants were given a brief description of two court proceedings to choose from to sentence the individuals committing the financial crimes. In the retributive court proceedings, participants were told that a “judge renders an appropriate punishment for the offender” and that the punishment “typically involves imprisonment.” For the restorative proceedings, participants were informed that a mediation occurs between the offender and the victimized people and the two parties “come to an agreement outlining what the offender must do to atone for the offense” and that the punishment for the offense could not include imprisonment, but that other alternative punishments such as “an apology, monetary compensation, or community service” were options for punishment (Gromet & Darley, 2006). After reading about these forms of justice, participants rated how likely they were to support a retributive process and a restorative process using 7-point Likert scales (1 = not likely at all, 7 = very likely). Participants were more likely to favor the restorative process (M = 4.63, SD = 1.35) over the retributive one (M = 4.14, SD = 1.38).

In addition to the main dependent measures of the type of court process favored by participants, I also computed ratings for how morally outraged participants were by the offense (M = 4.15, SD = 1.16), and how serious participants viewed the crime (M = 4.14, SD =1.09). Participants made these ratings using 7-point Likert scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

**Results**

**Manipulation Check**

I first sought to determine if I successfully manipulated participants’ subjective perceptions of their socioeconomic rank. To that end, I subjected participants’ ladder-ranking scores to an independent samples t-test. As expected, participants envisioning an interaction with someone at the very top of the social class hierarchy reported lower ladder rankings (M = 4.83) than participants thinking of an interaction with someone at the very bottom of the social-class hierarchy (M = 6.11), t(158) = -4.35, p < .001. This analysis suggests that participant socioeconomic rank was successfully manipulated.

**Social Class and Essentialism**

To test the hypothesis that upper-class individuals would more strongly endorse essentialist beliefs about social-class hierarchy, relative to their lower-class counterparts, I subjected manipulated upper- and lower-class rank participants’ essentialism ratings to an independent samples t-test. As expected, upper-class rank participants (M = 4.08) reported stronger essentialist beliefs about social class categories than participants manipulated to
experience lower-class rank ($M = 3.79$), $t(158) = -2.05, p < .05$. That is, manipulated upper-class rank participants tended to endorse beliefs suggesting that social class is stable, inherent, and biologically determined, whereas participants manipulated to experience lower rank in the socioeconomic hierarchy tended to believe that social class is a socially constructed category.

*Social Class and Policy Decisions*

To test our hypothesis that lower-class individuals tend to endorse social policies emphasizing restorative forms of justice, I conducted a 2 (punishment type) x 2 (socioeconomic rank) mixed model ANOVA with punishment type as the within-subjects factor. The analysis yielded a significant punishment type main effect, such that participants nominated more restorative punishments ($M = 4.60$) relative to retributive punishments ($M = 4.18$), $F(1,158) = 4.55, p < .05$. A marginally significant main effect for socioeconomic rank also emerged such that lower-class rank participants ($M = 4.46$) endorsed less punishment, regardless of the type of punishment, relative to upper-class rank participants ($M = 4.32$), $F(1,158) = 3.23, p = .07$. However, this effect was qualified by a marginally significant interaction, $F(1,158) = 3.42, p = .07$. Examination of the separate types of punishment yielded a pattern in line with our hypotheses. As expected, upper-class rank participants ($M = 4.41$) were less likely to endorse restorative punishments relative to lower-class rank participants ($M = 4.85$), $t(158) = 2.07, p < .05$. That is, upper-class participants were less likely to endorse restorative forms of justice emphasizing rehabilitation for the offender of the financial crime. When examining retributive punishments, upper-class rank ($M = 4.22$) and lower-class rank participants ($M = 4.06$) did not differ in terms of their endorsement of these punishments $t(158) = -0.71, ns$.

Finally, I also examined manipulated social class differences in judgments of how morally outraged participants were, and how serious participants thought the offense was, finding no differences between each of these measures for upper- and lower-class rank participants ($ps > .68$). Moreover, when conducting the above ANOVA while adding moral outrage and the seriousness of the law-breaking behavior as covariates, the interaction was significant, $F(1,156) = 4.57, p < .05$, suggesting that manipulated social class rank was related to endorsement of restorative punishments independent of moral outrage for law violating behavior, or beliefs about the seriousness of this behavior. Instead, the results suggest that lower-class individuals simply favor forms of justice that allow for rehabilitation and the restoration of individuals to society (see Figure 3).

*Essentialism Explains the Relationship Between Social Class and Policy Decisions*

Surprisingly, and unlike Studies 1 and 2, though elevated essentialist conceptions of social class were associated with reduced endorsement of restorative punishments, the association was not significant, $t(157) = -0.94, ns$, making a test of mediation intractable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Nevertheless, we tested our final prediction that essentialist beliefs account for the relationship between social class and restorative policy decisions by subjecting essentialist beliefs to an Analysis of Covariance with restorative justice ratings as the dependent measure, the manipulation of relative social class as the independent variable, and participant essentialist ratings entered as a control. When not accounting for essentialist beliefs, upper-class rank participants ($M = 4.35$) showed weaker endorsement of restorative policies, relative to their lower-class rank counterparts ($M = 4.85$), $F(1,158) = 4.29, p < .05$; however, when entering essentialist beliefs as a covariate, the relationship between social class rank and restorative justice decisions became marginal $F(1,157) = 3.51, p = .06$. Moreover, when conducting a parallel analysis of covariance, accounting instead for participants’ judgments of how morally
outraged participants were by the offense, and how serious they felt the offense was, social class rank still significantly predicted restorative justice decisions, $F(1,155) = 5.16, p < .05$, as upper-class individuals were less likely to endorse restorative punishments relative to their lower-class counterparts, even after accounting for these general moral and severity judgments about the offense.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide evidence in support of our hypotheses. Specifically, participants manipulated to experience momentary perceptions of upper social class rank tended to endorse essentialist beliefs about social class categories and tended to oppose more restorative punishments, relative to their manipulated lower-class counterparts. Moreover, upper-class rank participants’ essentialist beliefs accounted for class-based preferences for restorative punishment.

In addition, and as in Study 2, participants manipulated to experience lower-social class rank and reduced essentialist beliefs about social hierarchy did not differ from upper-class rank participants on preferences for retributive punishment. Nor did participants differ in perceptions of severity of offenses, or moral outrage engendered by offenses, suggesting that indeed, upper-class individuals do not desire to punish people more, they simply choose less restorative forms of punishment. Finally, through the manipulation of social class rank, Study 3 provides evidence that social class causes changes in both essentialist beliefs about social hierarchy and endorsement of restorative punishments.

General Discussion

Social rank in society is a fundamental organizing principle in social relations (Keltner et al., 2008), and in the present research, we examined essentialist lay theories about one aspect of human hierarchy—a person’s social class or socioeconomic position in society. Drawing from theory suggesting that elevated rank in society should promote essentialist lay theories (Keller, 2005), and from research suggesting that upper-class rank individuals favor internal, dispositional explanations for the social structure of society (Kraus et al., 2009), we expected that upper-class individuals would be more likely to endorse essentialist lay theories about social class relative to their lower-class counterparts. Moreover, we expected that class-based differences in essentialist lay theories would explain why upper-class individuals tend to be less restorative in their social policy judgments, reflecting their opposition to policies suggesting that individual circumstances can be improved by external social influence.

Consistent with expectations, Study 1 showed that people of upper subjective SES tended to think of social class categories in more essentialist terms, and as a result, were more likely to reject restorative policies for education funding, taxation, voting rights, and punishment. Study 2 extended these initial findings by demonstrating that manipulating people’s essentialist beliefs of social class hierarchy led to shifts in restorative policy judgments such that individuals receiving information that social hierarchy was essentialist tended to oppose restorative policies for dealing with students caught cheating. Building on these initial studies, Study 3 manipulated momentary perceptions of relative socioeconomic rank, and found that manipulated upper-class rank individuals endorsed more essentialist conceptions of social class, and as a result, were more likely to reject restorative justice proceedings for people caught engaging in economic crimes. Moreover, Study 1 found that the relationships between social class, essentialist lay theories, and restorative policy decisions were independent of two constructs that covary with social class: ethnicity and political ideology.
Importantly, differences in social class and essentialist lay theories did not shape differences in desire to punish people engaged in academic cheating or economic crime using retributive means. That is, upper-class individuals who endorsed essentialist beliefs about social class categories were just as likely to endorse punitive punishments, and to be morally outraged by law-breaking behavior, as their lower-class counterparts who endorsed more constructivist beliefs about social class categories. Instead, constructivist conceptions of social class hierarchy (relative to essentialist conceptions) seem to increase endorsement for policies focused on rehabilitating vulnerable individuals.

Essentialism, Social Policy, and Social Mobility

The current studies highlight the importance of understanding essentialist beliefs about social class. That constructivist beliefs about social class categories led, in the current work, to more restorative social policies suggests that individuals who believe social class hierarchy in society is based on changeable, external social forces are likely to favor a broad range of social policies related to education funding, academic policy, and judicial procedure that focus not on punitive forms of punishment, but rather on rehabilitating law-breaking individuals, and restoring and improving the lives of vulnerable members of society.

Given that the current justice system in the United States is based on retributive, rather than restorative, punishment strategies (Gromet & Darley, 2006; Weiner et al., 1997), the current research anticipates the following question: Do essentialist beliefs in social hierarchy underlie current punishment practices in the United States? Future research is needed to better understand how shifting essentialist beliefs could change current justice practices, and how these changes would impact society as a whole. That is, future research is needed to better understand how reducing essentialist beliefs of social hierarchy impacts the policy decisions of law makers, or the punishments rendered by judges during court proceedings. Would such reduction in essentialism increase rehabilitation-based punishments for law-breaking individuals that could improve community life in the long term, or even increase opposition to economic inequality?

Similarly, the current results provide some initial evidence supporting the theoretical perspective that essentialist beliefs are associated with justifying and legitimizing inequality in society (Keller, 2005; Morton et al., 2009). In support of this perspective, essentialist lay theories of social class categories, among upper-class individuals, were associated with less support for restorative policies such as tax relief policies for poorer families (Study 1), academic policies that rehabilitate rather than expel cheating students (Study 2), and court policies that rehabilitate rather than punitively punish perpetrators of financial crimes (Study 3). That essentialist beliefs endorsed by upper-class individuals were associated with rejection of these restorative policies, whose indirect benefits include a potential reduction of social inequality, suggests that one way in which individuals maintain their elevated social rank in society is through endorsing beliefs that social rank in society is stable over time, inherent, and biologically determined. Future research is necessary to determine what other legitimizing behaviors high-status individuals may engage in to justify their elevated rank in society (e.g., opposition to affirmative action programs), and whether essentialist conceptions of social categories explain this behavior.

As well, it is important to consider how essentialist lay theories contribute to beliefs about reduced social mobility among lower-class individuals (see Kennedy, Kawachi, Prothrow-Stith, Lochner, & Gupta, 1998; Melchior et al., 2006). According to the current research, lower-class individuals endorse social constructivist conceptions of social class suggesting that class is constructed by external forces, and not by internal dispositions, biology, and genes. On the one
hand, this conception of social class represents an optimistic understanding of social class hierarchy, in that social mobility is not blocked by genetic pre-determinants of lower-class status. However, as previous research suggests, lower-class individuals are also keenly aware of the uncontrollable contextual factors that influence their lives (Kraus et al., 2009), and tend to favor political actions that perpetuate the current social order (Jost et al., 2002). As such, it will be interesting in future research to consider whether reduced essentialist lay theories of social class increase the pursuit of economic advancement among lower-class individuals, or if these reductions in essentialism further focus lower-class individuals on the uncontrollable external forces that impact their lives, and keep them in lower ranking positions.

Finally, essentialist beliefs about social class may also be a primary determinant of compassionate responses among lower- and upper-class individuals (e.g., Independent Sector, 2002). Given the restorative policies favored by lower-class individuals, relative to upper-class individuals, perhaps essentialism leads lower-class individuals to experience greater compassion towards others, to give greater donations to charity, or to exhibit greater helping behavior. Future research is necessary to test these possibilities.

Notwithstanding the findings from the present investigation, a few limitations are worth mentioning. First, the results of our current studies would be benefited by generalizing to other communities. For example, while our adult samples are representative of the wide-range of education and income found in the United States, the samples do fall short in terms of generalizing to communities characterized by poverty, or to communities of great affluence. Replicating this research among these samples gives us greater confidence in the conclusions reached in the present research.

It would also be interesting to test the present hypotheses in other cultures (see Mahalingam, 1998; 2003), in particular those where economic inequality is not as pronounced. Evidence indicates that economic disparities between rich and poor may be at a historical high in the United States (Phillips, 2002), which suggests that essentialist lay theories of social class have an objective basis for being so powerful in shaping voting behavior and policy decisions among upper- and lower-class individuals. Would similar effects be observed in cultures with lesser disparities between rich and poor?

Conclusion

Social class is the primary determinant of rank in human social hierarchy, and profoundly shapes perceptions of the social environment. In this research, I have shown that social class shapes essentialist conceptions of social class hierarchy that, in turn, impact endorsement of social justice policies related to a wide variety of social issues. In this way, social class leads to differences in the way individuals explain their rank in society, and the forms of social justice they ascribe to in their everyday lives.
References


Haslam (Eds.), *The social psychology of stereotyping and group life* (pp. 20-50). Oxford, England: Blackwell.

## Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Other people’s social class is easy to figure out.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A child from a higher class can be easily picked out from a group of lower-class children.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I think even if everyone wore the same clothing, people would still be able to tell your social class.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It is impossible to determine one’s social class by examining their genes. (r)</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A person’s social class is easy to figure out even when they are from another country.</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Children probably learn about social class automatically, without much help from adults.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A person’s social class does not change from their social class at birth.</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Even after centuries, families will have the same social class as now.</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. It is easy to figure out another person’s social class just by looking at them.</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Social class is partly biological.</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.39</td>
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Note: (r) symbol indicates that item is reverse-scored.
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<tr>
<th>Table 2.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Voting Policy Items</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Funding</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Low-scoring school districts will receive funds to</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve academic performance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. High-scoring school districts will receive greater</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state funds as a reward for high academic performance. (r)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tax Policy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. All citizens should pay the same amount of taxes</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each year. (r)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Tax increases should be targeted to the wealthiest</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>2.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>5%.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Voting Rights</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Only homeowners should be allowed to vote. (r)</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Convicted felons should not be allowed to vote. (r)</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Punishment Rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Torture of known and suspected terrorists should be</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permitted. (r)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. After three felony convictions, people should be</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentenced to life in prison without parole. (r)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. State funds should be earmarked for rehabilitation</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of people suffering from drug and substance abuse.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Execution should be federally banned.</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Note:</strong> (r) symbol indicates that item is reverse-</td>
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<td>scored.</td>
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Table 3.

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<th>Education Funding</th>
<th>Taxation</th>
<th>Voting Rights</th>
<th>Punishment Rights</th>
<th>All Policies</th>
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<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
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<td>Essentialism</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10
Figures

Subjective SES → -.14* → Social Policy Decisions

Essentialism

Subjective SES → .21** → Essentialism

Essentialism → -.15* → Social Policy Decisions

Subjective SES → -.11 → Social Policy Decisions
Appendix A

Stimulus Materials for Essentialist [Constructivist] beliefs about Social Class Categories

Scientists Pinpoint Genetic Underpinnings of Socioeconomic Status [Scientists Reveal that Socioeconomic Status has no Genetic Basis]

Researchers recently collected data from people from all different levels of socioeconomic status. This included people from very low economic backgrounds and very wealthy people. In their analysis, the researchers looked at family histories of socioeconomic status and genetic similarities between members of the same socioeconomic status (SES) groups. The researchers found that children of lower SES parents are much more likely to become lower SES than children of upper SES parents [just as likely to become upper SES as children of upper SES parents]. In addition, lower SES people tend to have more genetic similarity with other lower SES people [as much genetic similarity with other lower SES people than with upper SES people]. As a result of their analyses, the researchers are now able to correctly guess a person’s socioeconomic status at a rate that was significantly above chance [were not able to correctly guess a person’s socioeconomic status at a rate that was significantly above chance]. The lead author was quoted as saying that “We obtain our genetic material from our parents, so we generally inherit their success, work ethic, and intelligence, which ultimately determines our socioeconomic status.” [“We obtain our genetic material from our parents, but the practice of classifying people into socioeconomic groups based on genetic information is entirely cultural in origin. There’s just no genetic basis to socioeconomic status.”]