**ARTICLE**

# Social class transitions: Three guiding questions for moving the study of class to a dynamic perspective

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**Abstract**

We argue that social psychological theories of social class should move toward a more dynamic view that considers class change experiences to supplement more static perspectives focused on backgrounds or current positions. Indeed, social class is a unique demographic form of hierarchy because of its dynamism: social class is relatively malleable compared to race and gender; it can change multiple times in one's lifespan; and unlike age, it is something individuals can strive to change and that they often believe is possible to change. We review work from a variety of fields, including sociology, psychology, and organizational behavior, that begins to tackle the question of social class change experiences. Drawing on theories of social class transitions, acculturation, and identity change, we present an organizing framework suggesting three objective, structural features of social class change that should inform individuals' experience of changing class: What direction am I going (resource expectations)? How did I get here (predictability)? Where should I be (social comparisons)? We review emerging work as well as gaps in existing theory and suggest avenues for future research.

Most research on the psychology of social class has treated it as a relatively stable factor. Studies examine either how early formative experiences with social class may be "imprinted" and thus guide behavior later in life (Griskevicius et al., 2013; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015), or how one's current position affects one's experiences (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011; Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Building on these traditions, we advocate a new direction in studying social class that treats it as a more dynamic construct that

can change over time. Note: Several theoretical traditions might be characterized as occupying this space, including habitus models from sociology (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990) and cultural psychology (Stephens et al., 2014), as well as models of path dependence from organizational behavior (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Some of this work builds on insights from developmental psychology that have used the word "imprinting," for example, to describe critical periods for language learning that shape accent into adulthood. Nevertheless, debate continues on the extent to which habitus is easily changed (Curl, Lareau, & Wu, 2018), and the word "imprinting" risks essentializing social class differences, neglecting the potential for change and the reality of fluidity over time. As such, habitus is a better term.

We contend that to develop a deeper understanding of social class, it is necessary to explore stories of people moving up and down the ladder and examine how they adapt and grow in response to those changes; without doing so, we risk essentializing social class. When social class and its effects are treated as stable, even well-intentioned individuals can sometimes overlook the humanity and potential of those from lower-class positions (Rangel & Keller, 2011). For example, some have argued that the negative effects of being born into an under-resourced environment are likely to persist and affect the way people engage with others and their work environments (e.g., Barling & Weatherhead, 2016; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). This perspective, often referred to as the "deficit model" of social class (see Frankenhuis & Nettle, 2020, overlooks a plethora of arguments from life course socialization, organizational socialization, and acculturation research suggesting that human beings adapt in response to new environmental stimuli. We argue that future research concerning social class can benefit from considering how people change and grow via exposure to new contexts (e.g., Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Berry, 1997; Dweck, 2008).

# 1 | CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS

Social class refers to the resources a person has in society, most often indexed by their income, education, occupational prestige, and their perception of their position vis-à-vis others (Côté, 2011). It is often used to categorize individuals and can be discerned by others with some accuracy (Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017). Several theoretical perspectives have guided the social psychological study of class thus far; we consider each briefly below (for more extensive reviews, see Côté, 2011; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Loignon & Woehr, 2018; Stephens et al., 2014).

## 1.1 | The life history approach

One stream of research has focused on documenting the surprising and long-lasting effects of a person's social class origins. For example, scholars have shown that the way adults respond to stimuli in their environment can be traced to their early experiences with social class (the life history approach; e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2013; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016). In one representative study, scholars found that the way adults respond to economic uncertainty depends on how they grew up: whereas those who grew up in wealthier environments tend to delay their gratification in response to uncertainty, those who grew up in poorer environments tend to be more impulsive and risk-taking (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2013).

## 1.2 | The sociocultural approach

Another stream of research treats social class as a socially and historically constructed environment that people inhabit, including culturally specific ideas, practices, and institutions (the sociocultural approach; e.g., Kraus et al., 2011; Lareau, 2003; Stephens et al., 2014). A key insight in this line of work is that social class contexts are

important because they create variation in people's understanding of what it means to be a good or "appropriate" person in the world (i.e., models of self; Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). For example, in upper- and middle-class contexts, models of self-emphasize independence: agentic, distinct from others, and focused primarily on personal goals and preferences (Lareau, 2003; Stephens et al., 2014). By contrast, in working-class contexts, models of self-emphasize interdependence: adjusting to the environment, connecting to others, and responding to other people's needs and preferences. Furthermore, this work has shown that cultural assumptions developed from prior social class experiences can lead people to experience their current contexts differently. For example, studies have shown that colleges and professional workplaces can be more stressful and challenging for people who come from working-class backgrounds because these contexts tend to be built around upper- and middle-class cultural assumptions (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Belmi, Neale, Reiff, & Ulfe, 2020; Dittmann, Stephens, & Townsend, 2020; Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2020; Rivera, 2016; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012).

## 1.3 | The rank cognition approach

Finally, another stream of research has focused on the idea that people experience and construe their social class standing vis-à-vis others (the rank cognition approach; Kraus et al., 2012; Kraus & Keltner, 2013; see also Shah et al., 2012). This line of research has shown that subjective perceptions of social class, and associated affordances of social class contexts, can have profound effects on people's attitudes, behaviors, cognitions, and even health. For instance, researchers have found that those who perceive themselves as being higher on the ladder feel an enhanced sense of autonomy, freedom, and control over their environment (e.g., Kraus et al., 2012), whereas those who perceive themselves as lower on the ladder tend to experience constraint, uncertainty, and even helplessness—elements that create chronic psychological stress (Adler et al., 1994; Sapolsky, 2005). Indeed, beyond subjective perception, objective rank, and its associated demands (e.g., scarcity) have direct effects on cognition and well-being (e.g., cognitive depletion and stress; Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013; Shah et al., 2012).

## 2 | SOCIAL CLASS AFFORDS CONSTRAINED MALLEABILITY

These perspectives have revealed important insights and offer important places to start given that psychologists have devoted serious attention to the topic of social class only for a little more than a decade (Markus & Stephens, 2017). However, existing work has thus far been grounded in theories that tend to emphasize the importance of group-based categorization (e.g., identity, hierarchy, and inequality). Perhaps as a result of this categorization perspective, a significant proportion of existing work has taken a rather static view of social class, emphasizing the stability of contexts, norms, and behaviors, rather than agility and change. This is understandable given that social class is in fact quite static, at least in the U.S. context (OECD, 2018). As such, researchers have focused on the experience of stability, or the lack of change. Nevertheless, as the study of social class progresses, it will be important to consider perspectives on change (e.g., socialization, acculturation, and adaptation) to build theory around the factors that, we contend, make social class unique.

Social class differs from other major dimensions of social hierarchy, including race and gender (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), in part because of its relative malleability. Although race and gender as social constructs can change within an individual's lifespan, these changes in categories and group membership most often happen over the course of many generations (e.g., Ignatiev, 2012). On the other hand, not only can social class change within individual lifespans, but individuals also can actively work to change it, and society sets up structures to support (or deny) such change.

## 2.1 | Social class changes within the lifespan

Recent work has pointed out that while rates of intergenerational and lifespan upward mobility in developed nations are declining, social class nevertheless does change (Piketty, 2000). Although moving from the bottom of the social class strata to the top is fairly rare, data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics reveal that more than half of individuals born into the bottom and top quintile of family income move up or down, respectively, by at least one quintile, and approximately one-third move by more than one quintile (Bengali & Daly, 2013). At the individual level, as people develop human capital, obtain education, and garner employment, and promotion, they likewise gain more income, access new cultural capital, and experience more occupational prestige. The same is true for downward mobility. At both the national and individual level, changes in the environment can produce downward social class change experiences, as individuals lose access to income, education, and occupations. This downward trajectory is also associated with new cultural norms, ways of making decisions, social network contacts, and changes in prestige.

## 2.2 | Social class mobility beliefs

People believe that social class changes; they have so much faith in this idea that they tend to see more mobility than exists in reality. For instance, classic sociological work documents that such overly optimistic illusions lead individuals to feel their society is fair and just (Durkheim, 1933; Weber, 2001). Likewise, recent psychological work documents that Americans overestimate social class mobility (Kraus & Tan, 2015) and that beliefs in social class mobility increase tolerance for economic inequality (Davidai, 2018; Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016). When people believe that they can change their social class, they are willing to tolerate the existence of more dire conditions. Indeed, a variety of mobility beliefs, including belief in meritocracy, Protestant work ethic, and bootstrap beliefs, contribute to individuals' tolerance of economic inequality (Chow & Galak, 2012; McCoy & Major, 2007; Phillips & Lowery, 2020; Savani & Rattan, 2012). Altogether, people largely endorse that individuals' social class can and does change.

Further, and related to beliefs in the possibility for change, people actively strive to change their social class. Research finds that college students often justify the cost of attendance by believing that attending college will give them access to higher incomes and better occupations (Jensen, 2010; Montmarquette, Cannings, & Mahseredjian, 2002). Likewise, seeking better pay is among the most frequently cited reasons for geographic mobility in the United States (Kennan & Walker, 2011). People leave behind friends, family, and familiarity to go to better schools or get better jobs to increase their social class.

## 2.3 | Structural constraints on mobility

Finally, despite the potential for, beliefs about, and efforts toward change, social class change is nevertheless constrained, again making it unique among dimensions of social hierarchy. For instance, age necessarily changes linearly and automatically (North, 2019; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). In contrast, social class does not change automatically or uniformly for everyone. Rather, it is enabled and constrained by social structures (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; Reardon, 2011; Stephens et al., 2014). For instance, when individuals attend school in working-class neighborhoods, the economic returns of their education are reduced as compared with those attending schools in upper-class neighborhoods (Collins, 2019; Reardon, 2011). Neighborhoods are also associated with increased chances for upward mobility versus stagnation (Chetty et al., 2014). In addition, specific mobility patterns are more likely for some demographic groups than for others. For instance, divorce is more likely to result in downward mobility for women, especially those who were primary caretakers of children (Leopold, 2018). In the United States, Black and Latino men born into the middle class are more likely to experience downward mobility than are White men born into the middle class (Krause & Sawhill, 2018).

In sum, social class is an individually dynamic dimension of social hierarchy in ways that are distinct from other dimensions. Compared to race and gender, social class is more malleable, and people believe it to be malleable and attempt to change it. Social class is also relatively more constrained by social environment, compared to age. We contend that these unique and distinguishing features—constrained malleability—are likely to expand understanding of social class and its impact on experience and behavior.

# 3 | NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL CLASS CHANGE

Presently, the psychological experience of social class change is largely unknown. In this section, we first suggest that focusing on the unique dynamics of social class change represents a promising direction for a number of reasons. Next, we review nascent work in the area. Then, we consider insights from this emerging work, along with the unique features of social class, and integrate these to suggest a framework to guide future exploration of social class change.

## 3.1 | The need for a dynamic approach to social class

First, focusing on change and the structures that constrain or afford it helps to highlight a key perspective: observed social class differences are likely learned and habituated, so they may be unlearned via changes in environment. Specifically, differences in behavior and beliefs interact with social structures to produce more or less positive outcomes for individuals. Emphasizing social class change dynamics has the potential to reduce class essentialism, and to inspire more recognition of human experiences of change and growth. Certainly, previous research has worked to identify numerous positive factors associated with lower social class experiences, including increased communality and other skills (e.g., Kusserow, 2012; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Stephens et al., 2014). However, largely missing from the previous research is the consideration that people are shaped not only by their place in, but also by their movement throughout, the hierarchy. For instance, emerging work considering social class transitions finds that individuals can learn new norms in new class environments (e.g., Herrmann & Varnum, 2018a, 2018b), and that class background effects can be exacerbated by organizational context (Phillips et al., 2020). Further, this dynamic perspective emphasizes not only the negatives of change (e.g., cultural mismatch), but also the positives (e.g., resilience, cultural flexibility, empathy; Martin & Côté, 2019).

Second, focusing on features of social class transitions may help resolve mixed findings in existing literature. For example, scholars have been debating whether the rich are less ethical and more selfish than the poor (Dietze & Knowles, 2020; Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012; Schmukle, Korndörfer, & Egloff, 2019). Recent work finds that people of higher social class standing are indeed more entitled than their lower-class counterparts, but only when they were born into wealthy families (Côté et al., 2020). This work also finds that class migrants (those who had been upwardly or downwardly mobile), as well as those who have been under-resourced throughout their lives, feel less entitled compared to individuals who have been affluent throughout their lives. This suggests that upward and downward mobility may help dispel entitled beliefs, while being entrenched in higher positions sustains them.

Third, the experience of social class change is a human experience about which scholars simply know little. Some researchers have examined people's beliefs about social class change (Davidai, 2018; Kraus & Tan, 2015); others have explored how dominant group members behave in ways that make change more or less likely (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Phillips & Lowery, 2020; Rivera, 2016); and still others have studied how subordinate group members come to accept the unchanging systems they are in (Laurin, Engstrom, & Alic, 2019). However, one avenue that has yet to be fully explored is how people experience change and its implications for well-being, health, and adaptation.

## 3.2 | Emerging work on social class change

First, some empirical work emerging from the sociocultural paradigm has considered the psychological experience of upward mobility via education. For instance, several scholars have explored the transition experiences of first-generation college students, meaning those who are the first in their family to go to college. These scholars have found that first-generation students often feel like they do not belong in college settings (Stephens et al., 2012) and sometimes feel guilty about their upward mobility (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Herrmann & Varnum, 2018a, 2018b). Likewise, Rivera (2016) finds that even after graduation, first-generation students continue to feel like they do not belong in professional settings (see also Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Jack, 2016; Phillips et al., 2020; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Together, this recent work provides important insights about the psychology of upward transitions.

Second, aiming to generate more theoretical focus on how these upward mobility experiences affect identity, Destin and colleagues (Destin & Debrosse, 2017; Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017) have emphasized how social class change affects the development of individuals' personal and group identities, known as status-based identity. Drawing on perspectives from the psychology of self, including narrative identity and social identity theory, this work points to timing (when did change occur) and the stability and strength of status identities as key features of the social class transition that should affect psychological outcomes and behaviors. Ultimately, this finding highlights identity as the conduit through which objective social class changes (e.g., upward mobility after graduating college) affect subjective experience and behavior (e.g., committing to further schooling; sense of belonging).

Third, recent theoretical work has expanded beyond students, turning the spotlight on transition experiences across the lifespan. Martin and Côté (2019) examine how social class transitions affect the development of individuals' cultural toolkits (Swidler, 1986). They contend that social class change affords greater access to cultural, social, and economic resources, and thereby also provides the opportunity for class transitioners to develop skills in deploying the cultural elements of different class positions. For instance, if an individual grew up in a working-class neighborhood but joins the middle class as an adult, that individual has access to a wider range of cultural information than a person who has been in one class position their entire life. The authors argue that these transitioners may then be able to use their diverse cultural knowledge in a number of ways that could benefit themselves or the groups they care about. Importantly, this work posits that features of the social class transition ultimately shape the social class change experience and emergent cultural toolkit: specifically, the timing (when did change occur), duration (how long was the individual exposed to different social class experiences), and direction (was the change trajectory upward or downward) of one's transition.

Across this nascent work, a few shared themes emerge direction, stability, and timing. We incorporate these early perspectives on class transitions with extant theory on how social class change is afforded, and constrained, via social structures.

## 4 | MOVING FORWARD: INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS CHANGE

We suggest that emerging work on class transitions reveals three important and interrelated questions that are likely critical for individuals' experience of their own class transition: (a) What direction am I going? (anticipated resources in future position); (b) How did I get here? (attributions, legitimacy, and stability of the change); and (c) Where should I be? (social comparisons). We suggest that these three questions are critical because they help individuals make sense of their social class change and therefore influence their affect, identity, behaviors, cognitions, and well-being.

Question 1 focuses on direction, which refers to people's understanding of where they are going: they can see their class position as going up, going down, changing non-monotonically, or not changing at all. Direction helps individuals understand what cultural, social, economic, and status resources to expect in new class positions. Question 2 focuses on method of change, which refers to people's attributions regarding how they got to where they are. For

example, people can see the method of change as within their control or outside their control (legitimacy), and as permanent or short-lived (stability). Method of change helps individuals understand how predictable their future experience should be, thus impacting their sense of control. Question 3 focuses on social comparisons fostered by social class change. For instance, people may compare themselves to other members of the class they have recently joined, those they have left behind, those who remain higher or lower, or compare their position in light of their expected or ideal class position. Social comparison helps individuals understand their sense of identity and how they feel about their new position. Importantly, these three questions are interrelated; moving up or down is likely related to specific mechanisms that initiated the movement and how the individual responds to it. However, we address these questions separately in order to delineate them as consequential constructs for future research to consider.

As an organizing framework to explore these questions and generate preliminary insights into how they relate to the experience of social class change, we frame our arguments using a psychological acculturation and adaptation perspective (Berry, 1997; Graves, 1967). Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change that results from the meeting of different cultures (Berry, 1997; Sam & Berry, 2010). It refers to whether and how people adopt and integrate the cultural elements of their local context while maintaining (or not) the cultural elements of their past context. Four primary modes of acculturation are theorized (Berry, 1997). An integration strategy, often conceived as the most beneficial form of acculturation, reflects individuals' identification with both the culture they join and their culture of origin. In terms of class transitions, this would reflect a person identifying as a member both of their current social class and of their past social class. In an assimilation strategy, individuals identify with their current culture but not their culture of origin. This would reflect class transitioners largely eschewing the cultural patterns of their prior class and wholly adopting those of their current class. In a separation strategy, people reject their present cultural context while continuing to identify with their home culture. Lastly, a marginalization strategy, often viewed as the least effective form of acculturation, is one in which people reject both their current culture and their culture of origin.

We expect that transition directions, method of transition, and transition experiences will all contribute to how transitioners acculturate. A visual summary of our guiding questions and their relationship to change along our dimensions of interest via acculturation is presented in Figure 1.

## 4.1 | What direction am I going? Up, down, or all around

Nascent psychological work on social class change has largely focused on upward mobility experiences. However, other directional changes are possible and even more likely, and in each case, ought to influence people's anticipation
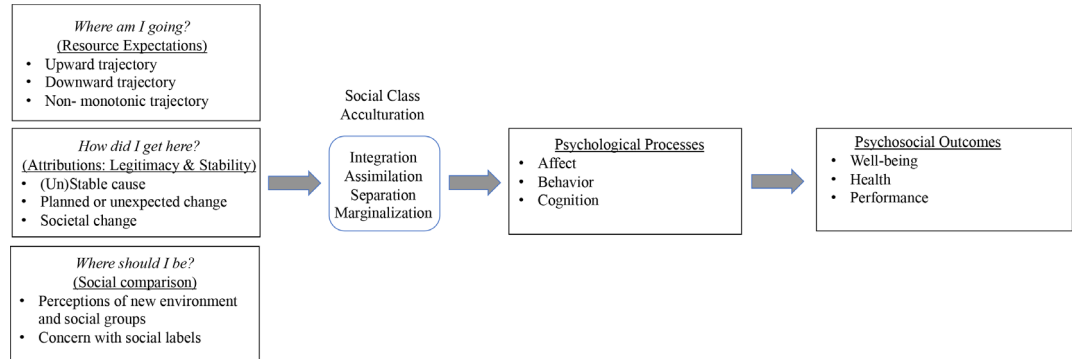


**FIGURE 1** Key considerations considering social class transitions and change via acculturation

of resources (both material and symbolic). Here, we focus on four major directions of change: upward, downward, non-monotonic, and no change.

### 4.1.1 | Upward mobility

While little work has considered social class change in psychology, the work that does exist has focused on directionality (Destin et al., 2017; Martin & Côté, 2019), and the bulk of it has concentrated on upwardly mobile experiences. It is tempting to assume that moving upward and experiencing greater comfort and resources would correspond to an assimilation or integration strategy in which an upward transitioner leans into their new position and either sheds or maintains the trappings of their prior class position. However, evidence suggests this may not always be the case. Phillips et al. (2020) find that students from working-class backgrounds may experience positive objective change in their social class by virtue of attending elite universities, but their subjective class experience may lag behind. Even after 4 years in college, students from working-class backgrounds report that they feel lower status, less belonging, and different cultural norms, compared with their middle-class peers. These results could indicate an initial separation acculturation strategy within elite institutions, such that those transitioners who come from more modest social backgrounds remain identified with their class origins and only slowly identify with their new context, if they do so at all.

Other evidence suggests, though, that when students from working-class backgrounds first experience socialization in elite private high schools, they report increased fit and experience better adjustment during college (Jack, 2016). Still other work has considered identity perspectives, focusing on how individuals develop narratives of their own upward trajectory, and how these narratives may produce more or less uncertainty and stress, depending on existing social support (Destin et al., 2017). Likewise, working-class students can develop bicultural identities, helping them achieve integrative experiences that support better academic performance and well-being (Herrmann & Varnum, 2018a, 2018b). Considered jointly, these findings suggest that, without social support for their existing norms, class migrants may experience marginalization and a lack of cultural change, similar to nation-state migrants, but that with support they may move toward cultural integration instead.

### 4.1.2 | Downward mobility

Significantly, less research in social psychology has addressed the issue of downward mobility. This is surprising, given that upward mobility has declined, whereas downward mobility is common and is brought about by myriad common causes, including health issues, divorce, job loss, bankruptcy, retirement, and broader exogenous shocks like economic downturns or pandemics (Chetty et al., 2014; Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007). However, while existing economic and sociological work demonstrates that downward transitions are common, and points to causes, we know somewhat less about the psychological experience of such downward mobility.

In sociology, ethnographic work in particular has explored some individual experiences in response to downward change. A notable theme in this work is resistance. Resistance reflects one's desire to continue to perceive oneself as elite, in control, and unique (Grella, 1990; Newman, 1988; Williams, 2017). This suggests a separation acculturation strategy in which one identifies with one's class origin and tries to eschew the elements of one's current class position. Indeed, moving downward reflects less access to desirable resources, including status as well as material benefits (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). As such, we expect people to strive to retain any accoutrement of higher positions, even if doing so limits effective acculturation to their new context. This fits with prospect theory perspectives, which suggest that people ought to react more strongly to experienced losses—even engaging in unethical behavior to prevent such loss—than to gains (e.g., Pettit, Doyle, Lount, & To, 2016).

Another theme is relative deprivation. In the political science literature, experiences of downward mobility are associated with feelings of alienation, resentment, and distrust of social institutions and political systems (Bean, Bonjean, & Burton, 1973; Daenekindt, van der Waal, & de Koster, 2018; see also Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Starr, & Williams, 1949). Some work has found that downward mobility is associated with increasing attraction to right-wing extremist orientations (Peugny, 2006; see also Bianchi, Hall, & Lee, 2018). To the extent that downward transitions provoke a sense of relative deprivation, we might expect people to engage in a marginalization strategy, in which they resist acculturation to their new context, but also reject their former context. Indeed, such marginalization may help explain why individuals gravitate toward alternative social groups as a source of community. However, recent work suggests that both upward and downward mobility may help dispel entitled beliefs, while stability or mobility within higher echelons sustains them (Côté et al., 2020). To the extent that downward mobility experiences foster increased empathy and reduced entitlement, those who have experienced downward transitions may retain connection across both communities and integrate their experiences instead.

Work from both organizational behavior and sociology focusing on the experiences of the unemployed also offers insights. A key theme here is that of depression, again suggesting a marginalization acculturation experience. Studies of the unemployed, especially those who perceive or experience their unemployment as more permanent, suggest that learned helplessness may result, with associated negative outcomes for health and well-being (Hamilton, Hoffman, Broman, & Rauma, 1993; Shepherd & Williams, 2018; West, Nicholson, & Rees, 1990). However, these negative experiences can be mitigated by coping strategies, including promotion-focused mindsets, as well as structural elements, including government or organizational support programs (Brockner et al., 1994; Wanberg, 1997).

Relevant to this work, sociology literatures have long debated what is known as the "dissociation hypothesis," trying to determine whether downward mobility produces more isolation and despondency (e.g., Chan, 2018; Daenekindt, 2017). Likewise, sociologists and health scientists have considered whether any kind of mobility may produce stress that in turn creates negative health outcomes (Houle & Martin, 2011; see also "John Henryism," Bennett et al., 2004). Overall, mixed findings persist, suggesting that ample individual (social support, coping strategies) and structural (neighborhood, government programs) buffers may protect some individuals from some of the negative psychological outcomes of downward mobility.

While this work from other fields helps us understand the consequences of downward mobility, the full psychological experience of downward transitions and resulting adjustment, and how both relate to behavior, is still largely unknown and fertile ground for future work. Social psychological approaches to exploring downward mobility could explore not only the experience of downward mobility but also why some people may adopt one acculturation strategy over others. Indeed, we present evidence above suggesting that downward mobility is likely to result in separation and marginalization acculturation approaches. However, as we will discuss below, we expect this to be influenced by how much people feel their downward mobility is legitimate and stable, feelings driven especially by perceptions of the method of change.

### 4.1.3 | All-around mobility

Questions other than the comparison of upward and downward trajectories are likely consequential for understanding the psychology of class transitions. One important question is about the effect of non-monotonic change, which is unique among dimensions of inequality (cf. age). For instance, when individuals observe others' upward or downward status trajectories, they likely presume this trajectory will continue (status momentum; Pettit & Marr, 2020; Pettit, Sivanathan, Gladstone, & Marr, 2013; Pettit et al., 2016), but this may not be the case. One person may grow up in an upper–middle-class family, then experience downward mobility as she begins her career as an elementary school teacher. Later, she may experience career advancement that moves her back to upper–middle-class status. In contrast, another person may grow up in a lower–middle-class family, attend college, and experience upward

mobility as he begins his career. Later, he may experience a sudden job loss combined with crushing student loan debt that leads him to experience downward mobility. Across varied experiences like these, a dynamic lifespan lens becomes important.

In practical terms, the complexity and range of transition experiences one could have are significant impediments to analytical exploration. However, unstable class positions may also shape cognition, and we have little idea why they might do so. Martin and Côté (2019) suggested that individuals may gather multiple perspectives as they experience social class changes. Extending this, we expect that individuals may gather even more cultural tools and experience using them as they move up, down, and back up again, or vice versa. From an acculturation perspective, people may have more opportunity to gain and deploy cultural knowledge from various positions and become more deeply multicultural.

Finally, given strong beliefs and striving for social class change, it is possible that even stasis (i.e., no change) may be experienced as meaningful (Pettit & Marr, 2020). Specifically, a lack of change may be experienced as stagnation (if the individual is attempting change; Bowles & Gintis, 2011), precarity (if the individual is avoiding change; He, Derfler-Rozin, & Pitesa, 2020), or success (if the individual is stable and content; Davidai, 2018).

## 4.2 | How did I get here?

Almost no work in psychology has considered the method of change, and how it may affect social class transition experiences. Indeed, people's attributions for social class change should impact their sense of legitimacy and stability of the change, and ultimately their sense of predictability and control. Here, we focus on three major categories for method of change: capital change, lifespan change, and societal change.

Different forms of capital may be associated with social class change and may relate to differences in class transition experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). For instance, income and/or wealth may change, often via hiring or firing, unexpected bills, inheritance, marriage, or divorce. Education provides a different source of change, garnering access to increased occupational prestige and financial capital, but without guaranteeing those outcomes. More directly, education provides credentials and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 2019). As such, we expect that when education is the source of social class change, individuals will feel relatively more stable than when financial capital is the source of change. First, education cannot be revoked and is likely a more stable social class signal than income. Second, education provides cultural norms that, even if credentials are revoked or rendered worthless, persist beyond any outward signal. Nevertheless, different forms of education are more likely to feel stable and legitimate than others; for instance, a prestigious university degree might enable stronger expectations of stability in the upper and middle classes than a degree from a university that is not considered "elite" (Collins, 2019). Likewise, wealth is likely to engender a greater sense of stability, although not necessarily legitimacy, as compared with income. This again reflects existing societal structures: educational credentials and wealth, including inheritances and large assets, are often more protected from taxes and/or loss than is income.

Lifespan considerations may also alter change experiences. Both economic and psychological data suggest that individuals expect and experience social class changes associated with specific life stages (e.g., Hall, 1978; Kaplan, 2012; OECD, 2018). First, individuals often expect temporary downward change associated with leaving their parents' house and a resulting loss of financial capital and access to other resources. This may be accompanied by increases in education and/or financial independence associated with a first full-time job. But in this instance, the change is likely seen as temporary. Thus, people may make less of an effort to engage in the cultural elements of their new class context because they perceive they will not be in that position for very long—effectively adopting a separation strategy or potentially a marginalization strategy to the extent that they also eschew the context of their upbringing. Regardless of the specific path, leaving one's primary and secondary education system and parental caretaking is an expected period of change that may alter how people go about the acculturation process.

Finally, social class change may be driven by societal factors; that is, nations can collectively undergo major capital changes, which in turn affect individuals (Bianchi, 2013, 2016). Considering recent examples, during the Great Recession of 2008, individuals across the world experienced downward mobility, losing jobs, wealth, and homes; as we revise this manuscript, the world is experiencing a pandemic-driven economic collapse and many millions around the world are suddenly and unexpectedly out of work, untethered from income and occupational prestige. On the other hand, when nations develop new industries and experiences renewed economic vigor, that experience can create massive upward mobility experiences. We expect that large-scale societal changes may feel both more stable and more legitimate and encourage people to adopt an integration acculturation approach, embracing the culture they have always lived in while also adopting the norms and prosperity of their new context.

Across these three methods, we expect variation in individuals' experiences of legitimacy and stability. To the extent that social class change is experienced as intentionally achieved and earned, this bodes well for psychological experiences of autonomy. Indeed, individuals work hard to protect their sense of having earned their social class status, largely in order to feel legitimate (Chow & Galak, 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2020). This may apply even in the case of downward mobility; for instance, if an individual chooses to forgo income potential for a career they find more meaningful, then the negative effects of downward mobility experiences may be mitigated. Further, method of change may contribute to individuals' expectations of stability; more stable changes may be more readily embraced, with important implications for identity and assimilation strategies. For instance, it is possible that educational changes feel both more stable and legitimate than societal changes, which may feel unfair and random.

## 4.3 | Where should I be?

Here, we consider how features of social class transitions affect subjective experience vis-à-vis social comparison. Indeed, social psychological work has long emphasized the power of social comparison to shape experience of the self and reality (Festinger, 1954; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Further, people may compare themselves not only to others, but also to their "ought" or ideal selves (e.g., Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986; see also Destin et al., 2017). We consider three interrelated features of social class transitions that may impact individuals' assessment of where they should be, and thus their feelings about the transition: distance, socially significant psychological anchors and labels, and timing.

Concerning distance, extant evidence from various theoretical perspectives suggests that people are able to adapt to new organizational settings (Bauer et al., 2007), national cultures (Berry, 1997), or class contexts (Stephens et al., 2014). Further, while people may be imprinted with certain values or norms early in childhood, they also can learn new ones via adult socialization experiences (Dweck, 2008; Lutfey & Mortimer, 2006). However, this work also suggests that the more distinct their new context is from their prior experiences, the more they are likely to struggle. Because the conditions associated with extreme wealth and extreme poverty tend to be polar opposites (Côté et al., 2017), our analysis suggests that smaller transitions may be easier from an acculturation perspective. That is, it may be easier to continue to identify with one's class of origin and also come to identify with a new class position if the difference between those positions is relatively small. It may become more challenging to sustain this integration mode of acculturation as the differences between one's origin and destination become increasingly stark.

Corresponding to the ways in which distance may influence the ease of acculturation, there are potentially complicated affective outcomes surrounding the distance of one's social class transition. An upward social class trajectory suggests greater access to resources, better health, and less stress, whereas downward trajectories may connote the opposite (Adler et al., 1994; Gallo & Matthews, 2003). A lay theory may therefore be that upward transitions correspond to greater positive affect as people enjoy increased access to resources and comfort, and this may be true when one travels a modest distance from one's class origin. However, there is a cost of moving up as well. Specifically, leaving one's class of origin, even on an upward trajectory, can lead to a loss of social connections and corresponding pressures to conform to a new set of expectations (Baldwin, 1985; Cole & Omari, 2003). It is

therefore possible that class transitions present not only identity challenges but also affective challenges, such that people may feel positively about some aspects of their transitions but negatively about others.

Additional factors related to distance traveled and how transitions feel vis-à-vis comparison processes are the linguistic labels and associated psychological anchors associated with various class positions. The use of class labels in extant literature has, to date, been categorical in nature and thus fairly imprecise in describing a continuous construct. "Middle-class" has been used to represent large swaths of society, even those in what would statistically and societally be considered upper-class groups. Meanwhile, economists and policymakers usually use "middle class" to indicate the middle quintile. Social identity perspectives, however, demonstrate the importance of classifiable groups to help shape experiences. It is therefore possible that categorical lifestyle changes may have a stronger impact on social class identity changes and acculturation than do other objective indicators. For example, being "in debt" or "debt-free," being a "homeowner" or not, and relying on "government assistance" or not, are all associated with certain levels of income and education, but such categorical label changes likely affect individuals' sense of social standing more than the dollar amount separating them might.

Finally, as noted by both Martin and Côté (2019) and Destin et al. (2017), the timing of a class transition and duration of experience in a class context are also likely consequential in how well a person psychologically adjusts to their new class context. Concerning timing, evidence suggests that people have impressionable periods (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) and critical periods early in life in which they may be more prone to the effects of "imprinting" (George, 1993; Gray, 1958). Economic evidence similarly suggests that, the earlier in their lives people make upward transitions, the more likely they are to experience better long-term life outcomes (Chetty & Hendren, 2018. Furthermore, acculturation research suggests that effective modes of adaptation may be more likely among those who make transitions when they are young. It is possible that having exposure to a class context only while young may limit the extent to which people see that class of origin as an entrenched part of their identity and thus may lead them either to integrate their past with their current position or to eschew their past position entirely (e.g., Jack, 2016). Conversely, it is also possible that social class changes occurring outside of impressionable life stages will not have the same psychological effects as those occurring during those impressionable periods. For instance, a child who began in a high-class position but moved down early in life may not have the same levels of identification with their higher-class background and may adjust to their new context more easily and with less stress than their parents. Conversely, as Phillips et al. (2020) found, young adults may struggle to incorporate their new class position into their identity.

In terms of duration, evidence suggests that adaptation to a context is positively related to longer exposure, and that some of that adaptation may be desirable. For example, scholars have found that among expatriates, increased exposure to a host country corresponds to increased adjustment (Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016), and as noted above, children who transition into more resource-enriched contexts early in life show more adaptation, such that they largely come to resemble those with no exposure to lower-class contexts (Houle, 2011). Meanwhile, others have noted that longer periods of time spent in poverty correspond to worse health outcomes and reduced personal mastery (Barling & Weatherhead, 2016; Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004). This suggests that time spent in a class position may be an important consideration in future class research, effectively moderating the effects of adjustment and psychological adaptation.

## 5 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Considering social class and class transitions through the lenses of acculturation, adaptation, socialization, and change reveals many potentially fruitful areas for future work that might meaningfully advance the scholarly understanding of social class. We especially highlight areas that accentuate what makes social class a unique form of hierarchy and diversity: its constrained malleability.

First, we argued that considering the direction of a class transition can be broadened to consider the psychological impact of both upward and downward mobility. Extending that, we could endeavor to explore other kinds of

movement, like nonlinear or non-monotonic trajectories, and how those experiences might shape individuals' feelings of stability, their access to objective and cultural resources, or their identification with some class positions over others.

Second, we suggested that scholars could also consider the method, or mechanism, of transition and how it relates to adjustment. For instance, a gain or loss of money or prestige could seem less stable than a gain of education. Transitions that happen naturally over a lifespan may be significantly less disruptive than changes that are not part of a traditional life trajectory. Likewise, changes that are planned, like taking a lower-paying or lower-prestige job for prosocial reasons, may make adaptation and acculturation easier because people are eager to engage their new context.

Third, we suggested that scholars consider how different trajectories might shape social comparison processes, and thus individual assessments of where they should be and how they should feel about their position. Specifically, traversing a large social class distance may present a complicated set of affective experiences—some likely positive as people get access to greater comfort and independence, and some negative as they leave their social connections and move away from the identity they once held. People may experience different levels of comfort—due to socially constructed labels around being "privileged," "in poverty," or a "homeowner"—that may shape their class experiences. When a change happens in a person's life, how long they spend in a class context may shape the extent to which they identify with one class versus another or the identity work they feel they must do.

We expect that increasing focus on these kinds of questions, and others that we have likely overlooked, will enable the development of rich new theories and methodologies around social class that can not only move scholarship forward, but also shed light on a practically meaningful and complicated element of all our social experiences. Nevertheless, this work suffers from a few limitations. While we have grounded in acculturation as our guiding framework, other approaches might be similarly useful in structuring the study of social class transitions. For instance, future work might also focus on material resource differences, or consider more explicit integration of social structures and institutional access offered across different social class stages. Indeed, we expect that applying prior theoretical perspectives to the question of class transitions will offer novel insights or present complicated theoretical puzzles worthy of pursuit.

In sum, social class transitions are important. Where am I going? How did I get here? Where should I be? These are likely critical questions for psychological experience of class mobility. Whether in times of boom or bust, rapid change or relative stability, considering the experience of social class change is likely important for furthering our understanding of the psychological experiences of different social class positions.

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