

BRIEF REPORT

Wealth, Poverty, and Happiness: Social Class Is Differentially Associated With Positive Emotions

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Is higher social class associated with greater happiness? In a large nationally representative U.S. sample ($N = 1,519$), we examined the association between social class (household income) and self-reported tendencies to experience 7 distinct positive emotions that are core to happiness: amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, enthusiasm, love, and pride. Consistent with past research indicating that social class underlies differential patterns of attending to the self versus orienting to others, higher social class was associated with greater self-oriented feelings of contentment and pride, and with greater amusement. In contrast, lower social class was associated with more other-oriented feelings of compassion and love, and with greater awe. There were no class differences in enthusiasm. We discuss that individuals from different social class backgrounds may exhibit different patterns of emotional responding due to their distinct social concerns and priorities. Whereas self-oriented emotions may follow from, foster, and reinforce upper class individuals' desire for independence and self-sufficiency, greater other-oriented emotion may enable lower class individuals to form more interdependent bonds to cope with their more threatening environments.

Keywords: social class, positive emotion, well-being, income, happiness

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How does social class—individuals' wealth, education, and occupational prestige (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, in press)—relate to experiences of positive emotion, like love, amusement, and awe? Extending research on the association between social class (e.g., income) and emotional well-being (e.g., Kahneman & Deaton, 2010), in a large nationally representative sample we examine the associations between social class and a variety of distinct positive emotions (Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006), many of which we test here for the first time (e.g., love, awe).

Social Class and Emotional Well-Being

In *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1668/1994), Thomas Hobbes described human social life as “nasty, brutish, and short.” Although Hobbes intended to capture the state of humankind, this sentiment has since been predominantly used to describe the poor and lower social classes, whose lives are seen as defined by discontent (e.g., “The Rich Are Different,” 2010). Corresponding research finds

that relative to their upper class counterparts, lower class individuals experience worse health outcomes (e.g., Barr, 2014), are subjected to increased social devaluation and exclusion (Piff et al., in press), and report reduced subjective well-being—for example, the relationship between income and life satisfaction is as high as .50 in some countries (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Howell & Howell, 2008; Lucas & Schimmack, 2009). Lower class individuals also experience more intense and recurring negative affect, including anxiety and depression (e.g., Gallo & Matthews, 2003). Lower class individuals, it would seem, experience less positive emotion and happiness.

And yet new research renders this view somewhat simplistic. Life satisfaction—which reflects a person's thoughts about his or her life—is conceptually and empirically distinguishable from emotional well-being, or experienced happiness, which refers to the emotional quality of an individual's everyday life—the frequency and intensity of experiences like joy, pride, and love (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Fredrickson, 1998; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Shiota et al., 2006). Whereas upper class individuals are generally more satisfied with their lives as a whole (Diener et al., 2010; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010), the association between social class and emotional well-being is more complex. In one study using the Gallup World Poll of 132 countries (Diener et al., 2010), income was strongly associated with self-reported life satisfaction ($r = .44$), but less so with positive and negative emotions felt during the preceding day ($r_s = .17$ and $-.11$, respectively). In another study using an experience sample method, higher income respondents were less likely to report

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feeling “sad” ($r = -.15$) but not more likely to report feeling “happy” ($r < .005$) than their lower income counterparts (Kushlev, Dunn, & Lucas, 2015). These findings indicate that higher social class may only be weakly (if at all) related to increased global positivity. Here, we examine how social class relates to experiences of various positive emotions in daily life that are central to happiness (Shiota et al., 2006).

Social Class and Positive Emotions

Upper and lower class individuals possess different resources (e.g., income) and inhabit distinct environments, which shape their concerns and priorities in unique ways. Increased material resources afford upper class individuals greater autonomy and reduced exposure to social and environmental threat, giving rise to an *internal, self-oriented focus*—greater attention to one’s internal states and goals and increased independence from others, as evidenced, for example, by decreased social attentiveness and more self-interested behavior. By contrast, lower class individuals are exposed to more threats to their well-being (e.g., increased crime, poorly funded schools), and they possess fewer resources to cope with these threats. As a result, lower class individuals develop an *external, other-oriented focus*—greater vigilance to the social context and interdependence with others it, as demonstrated, for example, by more affiliative and prosocial behavior (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff et al., in press).

These class-differentiated social orientations should be reflected in differential tendencies toward *self-oriented* versus *other-oriented* positive emotion, which refers to the “degree to which specific emotions . . . follow from, and also foster or reinforce, an independent versus interdependent self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 235). Lower class individuals—who have reduced objective resources to rely on—may exhibit more other-oriented patterns of emotion (e.g., compassion, love) as an adaptive response to facilitate the development of supportive, interdependent bonds that they can draw on to navigate threats and adversity, more common in their environments. On the other hand, upper class individuals, who have increased objective resources and are thus relatively self-sufficient, may feel more self-oriented emotions, like pride and contentment, to satisfy their increased desires for independence, status, and self-satisfaction (see also Kraus et al., 2012).

Initial evidence provides support for this hypothesis. One study found that when asked to recall common social situations, lower class individuals (i.e., those without a college degree) reported experiencing more socially engaging emotions (friendly feelings) and reduced socially disengaging emotions (pride) than upper class individuals (Na et al., 2010). In another study, lower class individuals (indexed using a composite of household income and parental education) self-reported greater compassion when observing a video depicting others’ suffering and displayed increased compassion-related peripheral physiology (heart-rate deceleration; Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012). This evidence indicates that upper class individuals may experience more self-oriented positive emotion, whereas lower class individuals may experience more other-oriented positive emotion. Our research replicates and extends this prior work in critical ways: by being the first to test the relationship between social class and several self- versus other-oriented positive emotions (love, pride, contentment, com-

passion) alongside reward-driven (enthusiasm) and information-driven positive emotions (awe, amusement), by studying these emotions simultaneously and disentangling their effects, and by using a nonstudent nationally representative sample of adults.

The Present Research

In a large representative U.S. sample, we tested the association between social class and trait-like tendencies to experience seven distinct positive emotions (Shiota et al., 2006). We indexed social class with income, because this facet of social class most directly reflects the differences in the objective resources that shape class differences in self-oriented versus other-oriented emotion (e.g., see Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013).¹ We examined two prototypically positive self-oriented emotions: *pride* (experienced when one succeeds in a socially valued task, enhancing status within the group) and *contentment* (experienced when individuals relish their current life circumstances and recent successes). We also examined two prototypically positive other-oriented emotions: *love* (positive attachment experienced when one perceives another as a reliable and trustworthy caregiver, and accepts receiving this care) and *compassion* (feelings of concern for another’s well-being that stimulate caretaking behavior toward others in need). We further tested class differences in the “epistemological” information-driven emotions of *amusement* (experienced during a cognitive shift from one knowledge structure to another in the contemplation of a target, as in the punch line of a joke) and *awe* (experienced when people perceive a complex stimulus that current knowledge structures cannot fully assimilate) and the reward-driven emotion of *enthusiasm* (feelings of anticipation of a reward that motivate appetitive behavior; for more discussion of these emotions, see Shiota et al., 2006, 2014). Measuring several emotions alongside one another allowed us to ascertain whether social class differentially relates to specific positive emotions.

Method

Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Duke University. Moreover, the use of the data for this project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Irvine.

Participants

In total, 1,519 participants (752 male, 767 female) randomly sampled from a Knowledge Networks panel representative of the entire U.S. population in terms of race/ethnicity, income, and telephone/Internet access (among many other characteristics) completed the study for \$5.00. Ages ranged from 24 to 93 years ($M = 50.19$, $SD = 16.72$). Seventy-two percent were European American, 12% were Latino/a, 10% were African/African American, and 6% indicated mixed race or “other.” Participants represented all 50

¹ Participants also completed a measure of educational attainment, which is a facet of social class (e.g., Kraus et al., 2012). Although we retain our focus on income because it most directly reflects objective resources, we report results for education in the online supplemental information.

U.S. states, with approximately 11% living in California, 8% in Texas, 6% in Florida, 6% in New York, and 5% in Pennsylvania, with the remaining states each representing under 5% of the sample.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed our focal measures of social class and positive emotions as part of a larger survey on morality (study details and codebook are available at <https://osf.io/ud2ky/>). To index social class, participants reported their household income by selecting one of 19 income categories ranging from 1 (<\$5,000) to 19 (≥\$175,000; *M* = 12.07, *SD* = 4.37).

Participants also completed an abbreviated version of the revised Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale, a well-validated measure of individual differences in tendencies to experience seven positive emotions (Shiota et al., 2006; Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). The questionnaire contained seven subscales, each consisting of three items: Amusement (e.g., “Many things are funny to me”; $\alpha = .85$; *M* = 5.05, *SD* = 1.13), Awe (e.g., “I often feel awe”; $\alpha = .83$; *M* = 4.62, *SD* = 1.16), Compassion (e.g., “Nurturing others gives me a warm feeling inside”; $\alpha = .78$; *M* = 5.27, *SD* = 1.02), Contentment (e.g., “I feel satisfied more often than most people”; $\alpha = .83$; *M* = 5.02, *SD* = 1.10), Enthusiasm (e.g., “I get great pleasure from pursuing my goals”; $\alpha = .63$; *M* = 5.27, *SD* = .90), Love (e.g., “I develop strong emotions toward people I can rely on”; $\alpha = .77$; *M* = 5.24, *SD* = .97), and Pride (“It feels good to know that people look up to me”; $\alpha = .78$; *M* = 5.50, *SD* = .89). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants could also refuse to answer; 13 participants did so and were treated as missing.

Participants indicated their political ideology on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 7 (*extremely conservative*), or they could elect not to answer (18 who refused to answer were treated as missing; *M* = 4.21, *SD* = 1.46). Participants also reported their religious affiliation from a list of 12 distinct religions/religious denominations, which included options to select *none* or not answer (16 who refused to answer were treated as missing). Participants who selected a religious affiliation were given a value of 1 (83.9%), whereas those who selected *none* were given a value of 0 (15%).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the correlations between emotions. To test whether positive emotions vary by social class, we conducted a

Table 1
Correlations Between Subscales of the Dispositional Positive Emotion Scale

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Amusement	—						
2. Awe	.50***	—					
3. Compassion	.39***	.51***	—				
4. Contentment	.45***	.59***	.48***	—			
5. Enthusiasm	.46***	.44***	.51***	.46***	—		
6. Love	.48***	.49***	.68***	.40***	.59***	—	
7. Pride	.44***	.43***	.58***	.47***	.68***	.63***	—

*** *p* < .001.

series of hierarchical linear regressions in which we regressed a single positive emotion subscale (e.g., compassion) onto the six remaining subscales (Step 1) and then entered social class (Step 2), which allowed us to examine specific associations between social class and different positive emotions. Consistent with our hypothesis concerning higher social class and self-oriented emotion, social class positively predicted pride, *b* = .011, *SE* = .004, $\beta = .055$, $t(1502) = 3.161$, *p* = .002, $\Delta R^2 = .003$, replicating prior research (Na et al., 2010), and contentment, *b* = .026, *SE* = .005, $\beta = .102$, $t(1502) = 5.265$, *p* < .001, $\Delta R^2 = .010$ —indicating that upper class individuals feel more satisfied of their lives. Social class also predicted amusement, such that upper class individuals reported finding more humor in everyday life, *b* = .015, *SE* = .005, $\beta = .057$, $t(1502) = 2.679$, *p* = .007, $\Delta R^2 = .003$.

Turning to the association between social class and other-oriented positive emotion, social class negatively predicted compassion, *b* = −.009, *SE* = .004, $\beta = −.038$, $t(1502) = −2.140$, *p* = .033, $\Delta R^2 = .001$, indicating that lower class individuals reported more caring for others than upper class participants, as prior research has shown (Stellar et al., 2012). We also found that social class negatively predicted love, *b* = −.008, *SE* = .004, $\beta = −.038$, $t(1502) = −2.246$, *p* = .025, $\Delta R^2 = .001$ —the first demonstration that lower class individuals are more prone to positive feelings of attachment and emotional intimacy. Interestingly, social class also negatively predicted awe, such that lower class individuals reported experiencing more awe than their upper class counterparts, *b* = −.016, *SE* = .005, $\beta = −.060$, $t(1502) = −3.140$, *p* = .002, $\Delta R^2 = .003$. This is intriguing given findings indicating that upper class individuals are more prone to narcissism (Piff, 2014)—self-regarding tendencies that may rein in propensities toward awe and its self-diminishing effects (e.g., Piff et al., 2015). Finally, enthusiasm was the only positive emotion not significantly associated with social class, *b* = .004, *SE* = .004, $\beta = −.021$, $t(1502) = 1.180$, *p* = .238, $\Delta R^2 < .0005$.

To verify the robustness of the results, we repeated the analyses controlling for relevant covariates. Controlling for age, ethnicity (0 = non-White, 1 = White), gender, religiosity, or political ideology, higher social class continued to be linked to greater pride, *t*s ≥ 3.077, *ps* < .01, contentment, *t*s ≥ 5.250, *ps* < .001, and amusement, *t*s ≥ 2.164, *ps* < .04, whereas lower social class continued to be linked to greater compassion, *t*s ≥ 1.821, *ps* < .07, love, *t*s ≥ 2.201, *ps* < .03, and awe, *t*s ≥ 3.006, *ps* < .01. Social class remained unrelated to enthusiasm.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Higher social class has many benefits, including improved health and life satisfaction (e.g., Barr, 2014; Diener & Oishi, 2000), but is it associated with greater happiness? We tested the relationship between social class and positive emotions—the frequency and intensity of experiences like pride, love, and awe that are key to happiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Replicating and extending past research (e.g., Na et al., 2010; Stellar et al., 2012), we found that upper class individuals exhibited greater self-oriented feelings of pride and contentment, as well as greater amusement, whereas lower class individuals exhibited more other-oriented feelings of compassion and love, as well as awe. Although these associations were statistically small in magnitude, they are comparable to those documented in prior work between social

class and patterns of social and emotional responding, including empathic tendencies (e.g., Côté et al., 2013; Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010). Moreover, these relationships emerged in a large nationally representative sample, while accounting for the effects of other positive emotions, and while controlling for constructs associated with class (e.g., race, political ideology)—all of which lends confidence to our results.

Why is social class associated with the frequency and intensity of experiences of particular positive self-oriented versus other-oriented emotions? Whereas pride and contentment may reflect upper class individuals' desire for independence and self-sufficiency, increased love and compassion may help lower class individuals form more harmonious, interdependent bonds to help cope with their more threatening environments—an intriguing avenue for future research. This accords with treatments of positive emotion as providing, in part, viable means for acquiring necessary resources (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004).

It will be important to build upon and extend our findings in other ways. Research should test other measures of social class, including subjective social class identity (e.g., Piff, 2014), to ascertain whether different facets of social class are differentially associated with emotion. Future work should also examine class differences in other-regarding emotions like gratitude and appreciation, and more negative, self-critical emotions like embarrassment and guilt (e.g., Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Finally, research should test other modalities of emotion, such as facial and vocal expressions, reactivity to emotional stimuli, and central and autonomic nervous system activation—all to further clarify how social class shapes people's social and emotional lives.

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