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Abstract

Social class signals refer to all cues based on which individuals perceive and judge others' social class. By processing these subtle cues, people can determine others' social class, which to a large extent determines individuals' social interaction behaviors at the interpersonal level. Taking dressing and grooming, facial features, and speech characteristics as examples, this illustrates the influence of social class signals on individuals' judgments of others' class. On this basis, the differential impacts of social class signals on interpersonal-level social interactions are summarized from three motivational perspectives: social exchange, social fairness, and social identity. Regarding social class signals themselves, it is necessary in the future to explore the issue of functional weakening of social class signals; due to the high correlation between social class signals and the concept of social class itself, future research should elaborate on the connections and distinctions between the two; given that few studies have examined how third-party social class signals affect interpersonal-level social interactions, exploring the influence and mechanisms of third-party social class signals in interactions will constitute an important advancement for research in the psychology of social class.

Full Text

Social Class Signals and Their Impact on Interpersonal-Level Social Interactions

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Abstract: Social class signals refer to all cues that individuals use to perceive and judge others' social class. By processing these subtle cues, people can determine others' social class, which in turn largely determines individuals' behaviors

in interpersonal-level social interactions. Using personal attire, facial features, and speech characteristics as examples, this paper illustrates how social class signals influence individuals' judgments of others' social class. Building upon this foundation, we synthesize the differential impacts of social class signals on interpersonal-level social interactions through three motivational perspectives: social exchange, social fairness, and social identity. Regarding social class signals themselves, future research should examine the weakening function of these signals. Given the high correlation between social class signals and the concept of social class, it is necessary to clarify the connections and distinctions between the two. Since few studies have investigated how third-party social class signals affect interpersonal-level social interactions, exploring the influence and mechanisms of third-party social class signals in interactions would represent an important advancement for social class psychology research.

Keywords: social class signals; interpersonal-level social interaction; social exchange; social fairness; social identity
Classification Number: C91.61

1 Introduction

Systematic and theoretical research on social class in psychology has only emerged in recent years. In China, sociologists have primarily focused on investigating the stratification of Chinese society and trends in class structure transformation (Li Chunling, 2017; Zheng Hangsheng, 2005), while psychologists have devoted relatively less attention to social class research. Nevertheless, social class psychology (Kraus & Stephens, 2012) has accumulated considerable theoretical and empirical achievements as an independent field. A review of relevant literature reveals that existing research primarily focuses on how an individual' s own social class influences their psychology and behavior (e.g., Guo Yongyu, Yang Shenlong, Li Jing, & Hu Xiaoyong, 2015; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011; Manstead, 2018), as well as how others' social class (signals) function as group classification labels that affect individuals' psychology and behavior in interpersonal social interactions (e.g., Xu Fengjiao, 2016; Kraus & Keltner, 2009; van Doesum, Tybur, & van Lange, 2017). As wealth disparity in China continues to intensify and class solidification becomes increasingly prominent, studying social class (signals) in contemporary China carries important practical significance. Guo Yongyu et al. (2015) have contributed to social class psychology research by reviewing research approaches in the field and the broad impacts of individuals' social class on their psychology and behavior, but their work did not address social class signals and their effects. Therefore, this paper introduces the concept and function of social class signals and further synthesizes their influence on interpersonal-level social interactions, aiming to advance social class psychology research and provide new perspectives for exploring class-related psychological issues in Chinese social governance.

Social class signals refer to all cues that individuals use to perceive and judge

others' social class (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Beyond serving as a social group classification label, social class also shapes class-specific value systems and behavior patterns within a given class (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). The various cues that convey these class-specific value systems and behavior patterns constitute social class signals. For instance, the food people eat, the places they frequent, their attire, facial features, speech characteristics, hobbies, and specific manners all serve as social class signals (e.g., Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). By processing these subtle social class signals, people can rapidly determine others' social class (Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017), which in turn largely determines the formation of interpersonal social interaction patterns and social relationships (Zheng Hangsheng, 2002). In other words, social class signals first influence individuals' judgments of others' social class (i.e., they serve a signaling function), subsequently exerting broad and profound effects in interpersonal social interactions. Therefore, this paper first introduces how social class signals influence individuals' judgments of others' social class, then synthesizes the effects of social class signals on interpersonal-level social interactions and their theoretical explanations, and finally outlines directions for future research.

2 How Social Class Signals Influence Judgments of Others' Social Class

Specific social classes provide their members with particular identities and behavioral norms, which lead people in a given class to act according to specific behavioral standards, thereby forming class-imprinted characteristics. These characteristics, in turn, reflect an individual's social class. Attire, facial features, and speech characteristics all constitute social class signals that affect individuals' judgments of others' social class in interpersonal interactions (Kraus et al., 2017).

Attire serves as an important symbol and element of class culture. For example, some researchers argue that clothing involves not only color and texture but also "legibility" —meaning that one can typically judge others' class through their dress (Hu Rong & Chen Sishi, 2008). Other scholars, after observing people' s daily lives and behaviors, have found that clothing and accessories, along with information about house style, home furnishings, and leisure activities, can represent individuals' living standards and have accordingly divided American society into nine hierarchical levels from high to low (Fussell, 1983). Empirical research also demonstrates that, as a nonverbal signal, a pair of shoes alone can convey extensive information about its owner. Beyond gender, age, and political orientation, people can judge others' approximate income level and social class from their shoes (Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012). Additionally, researchers have noted that high-class individuals exert significant demonstration effects on the conspicuous consumption behaviors of middle- and low-class individuals, particularly in purchasing brand-name apparel and other status goods. The reason lies in these luxury items' ability to signal one' s class to others, leading middle- and low-class individuals to emulate high-class consumption be-

haviors in an effort to appear more like the upper class (Hang Bin & Xiu Lei, 2016).

The ancient saying "one's appearance reflects one's heart" suggests that an individual's physical and psychological states manifest in their facial features. Moreover, a person's social class information also appears in their facial characteristics. Empirical studies have found that observers can judge a target's social class by observing facial features. For instance, researchers selected close-up facial photos from social networking sites and standardized these photos to ensure that factors such as race and background would not interfere with participants' judgments. They then presented partial facial regions and found that participants could infer the photographed individuals' wealth status by viewing only the eye region, mouth region, upper face, or lower face (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2016). This occurs because facial muscles and skin condition record individuals' habitual emotional expressions in daily life, and as people age, these traces of life experiences become increasingly visible on their faces (Malatesta, Fiore, & Messina, 1987). If a person frequently experiences material abundance and happiness, even without making any particular expression, the corners of their mouth tend to turn upward. Conversely, the hardships and misfortunes of life are reflected in the facial features of lower-class individuals. Based on these everyday experiences, people establish connections between wealth and facial features, believing that those with better living conditions experience higher levels of happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002) and display more confident and positive facial expressions, presenting a "rich face." In contrast, poverty brings more depression and anxiety to individuals, thus creating a "poor face" (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014).

Speech represents the most important pathway for completing interpersonal social interactions. Researchers believe that speech characteristics, including pronunciation and body movements during speaking, reveal the speaker's social class. Studies have found that participants can judge a speaker's social class by listening to a speech segment containing only seven English words (Kraus et al., 2017). Other researchers divided participants into two groups, with one group instructed to imitate a London dialect accent and the other to imitate standard British pronunciation. The results showed that the former group was perceived as having lower social class (Giles & Sassoon, 1983). Regarding body movements during speech, researchers have also identified their function as social class signals. For example, one study selected 100 college students from different social classes and paired them into 50 dyads. The participants were asked to sit face-to-face and simulate a job interview while discussing and determining effective interview strategies for five minutes. The entire interaction was video-recorded, and seven undergraduate observers later watched the muted videos and rated the participants' social class. The results revealed that even without additional information, observers could judge participants' social class solely by viewing their body movements (such as nodding, shaking heads, smiling, and raising eyebrows) (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

In summary, people in interpersonal social interactions judge others' social class through their attire, facial features, and speech characteristics. Of course, social class signals extend far beyond these examples to include hobbies, frequented places, and specific behavioral manners—all cues related to social class—that broadly influence interpersonal social interactions. In social exchanges, people process these subtle social class signals to determine others' social class, which subsequently affects their behavioral performance in interpersonal interactions. Some scholars have noted that based on three different motivational factors—social exchange, social fairness, and social identity—social class signals exert varying effects on interpersonal-level social interactions (van Doesum et al., 2017). The following sections accordingly synthesize these effects from three perspectives: how high social class signals promote interpersonal social interaction, how low social class signals promote interpersonal social interaction, and how social class signals interact with individuals' own class to influence interpersonal social interaction.

3.1 High Social Class Signals Promote Interpersonal-Level Social Interaction: A Social Exchange Perspective

Marx noted that among all social relationships, the most fundamental are the various interest relationships formed in social activities. Social exchange theory similarly posits that human behavior is governed by exchange activities that bring rewards and remuneration, and that all human social activities can be reduced to a form of exchange. The relationships formed in social exchange are themselves exchange relationships (Cao, Yu, Wu, & Zhou, 2015). People exchange not only material goods and money but also social commodities such as love, services, information, and status (Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2015). Compared to high-class individuals, low-class individuals have fewer educational opportunities, live in harsher environments, and face constant threats of unemployment. They possess fewer social resources, and their lives are filled with uncertainty. Under such circumstances, the likelihood of obtaining high returns through sharing resources or cooperating with low-class individuals is low, and forming alliances with them is not easily convertible into maximized self-interest, thus being considered "unworthy." Conversely, the more social resources the other party possesses and the higher their social class, the greater the likelihood and value of future benefits from active engagement with them (Fu Xinyuan, 2016). Based on social exchange motivations, people generally believe that interacting with high-class individuals yields greater benefits than interacting with low-class individuals, and thus are more inclined to exhibit behaviors that cater to higher-class individuals in interpersonal social interactions.

As early as 1973, Peruvian researchers discovered that high social class signals could promote people' s willingness to form friendships. The experiment required participants to read a passage describing others' social class information. One description stated: "They graduated from Peruvian universities and are members of elite social clubs," while the alternative description read: "They

are Peruvian indigenous people who have not attended university." The results showed that compared to the indigenous people without university education, participants were more eager to befriend the first group (Bergeron & Zanna, 1973). Other research has found that clothing as a social class signal affects negotiation outcomes. Researchers recruited a group of male participants and randomly assigned them to three groups: one group wore black suits and black leather dress shoes purchased from high-end department stores (high social class signal), another group wore white T-shirts, blue sweatpants, and plastic sandals purchased from discount supermarkets (low social class signal), and the third group wore ordinary casual clothing (control condition). The experiment required these participants to simulate a negotiation with a stranger. The results revealed that strangers perceived suit-wearing participants as more powerful and made greater concessions to them, enabling the suit group to achieve more favorable negotiation outcomes with average profits exceeding $2 million. In contrast, participants wearing cheap T-shirts were perceived as less competent, and strangers were consequently less willing to make concessions to them, resulting in average profits of only $680,000 for the T-shirt group. Participants in ordinary casual clothing earned only $1.2 million (Kraus & Mendes, 2014).

Furthermore, job seekers' high social class signals can enhance employers' hiring decisions. Researchers collected 40 standard neutral facial photos of college students and classified them as low or high social class based on their family income levels. They then informed workplace personnel that the individuals in the photos were accounting majors about to graduate and asked them to judge how likely these graduates were to successfully find an accounting job. The results indicated that compared to photos of low-class college students, photos of high-class college students were perceived as more likely to successfully secure accounting positions (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). Another study found that some world-renowned corporations screen for higher-class potential employees based on applicants' hobbies and interests during recruitment (Rivera, 2016). Consequently, job applicants who mention high-status hobbies (such as playing golf) or indicate membership in exclusive leisure clubs on their resumes are more likely to secure jobs at large corporations (e.g., Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). These findings collectively demonstrate that when seeking and selecting interaction partners, individuals judge potential targets' social class through external social class signals and show preference for and cater to cooperation partners from higher social classes.

3.2 Low Social Class Signals Promote Interpersonal-Level Social Interaction: A Social Fairness Perspective

Social fairness theory maintains that people care not only about their own interests but also about the fairness of benefit distribution between themselves and others. This pursuit of fairness manifests as an aversion to unfairness, and thus people have the motivation to improve such unequal distributions in daily interactions (fairness motives; Leventhal, 1980). Compared to high-class indi-

viduals, low-class individuals possess fewer resources, face more threats, and experience more difficult life circumstances (Guo Yongyu et al., 2015). Their low social class signals, such as worn clothing and impoverished appearances, easily evoke sympathy and motivation to improve this unfairness. When the other party' s low social class signals become contextual cues that trigger sympathy and unfairness aversion, and when people can sensitively perceive these cues, their interpersonal interaction decisions are influenced by their current level of sympathy and fairness motivation.

Scholars have confirmed the phenomenon of low social class signals promoting interpersonal social interaction through virtual scenario priming tasks (van Doesum et al., 2017). Researchers asked participants to read a passage describing "John," a man in his forties. In the high social class signal condition, the description read: "John graduated from a prestigious university, holds an ideal job, lives in an upscale neighborhood, drives a luxury car, and has an annual income of approximately $150,000." In the low social class signal condition, the description read: "John is a man in his forties with a high school education, holds a less-than-ideal job, lives in a less desirable neighborhood, drives an old car, and has an annual income of approximately $40,000." Participants were then asked to imagine selecting a gift with "John," where they had priority in choosing from a limited variety and quantity of gifts. The results showed that in the low social class signal condition, participants were more considerate of the other party and left more options for "John" when selecting gifts. Another study based on the dictator game found similar conclusions. In this experiment, college student participants either faced a peer "whose father works away from home and whose mother farms at home" or a peer "whose father runs a sizable company and whose mother is a full-time housewife." Compared to the second scenario, college students in the first situation behaved more generously, allocating significantly higher amounts to their peers in the dictator game (Xu Fengjiao, 2016).

These findings align with social fairness theory, which posits that people have the motivation and tendency to improve unfairness and that when their income exceeds others' , they will sacrifice their own interests to help others (Cappelen, Eichele, Hugdahl, Specht, Sørensen, & Tungodden, 2014). Driven by social fairness motivation, individuals judge interaction partners' social class through social class signals and exhibit strong desires and actions to improve the welfare of low-class individuals.

3.3 The Influence of Social Class Signals on Interpersonal-Level Social Interaction: A Social Identity Perspective

Social identity theory posits that individuals develop identification with groups to which they belong through social categorization, resulting in in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice (Haslam, 2014). Social class represents groups occupying different positions in the social hierarchy due to economic, political, and other factors (Guo Yongyu et al., 2015). As a group classification label,

others' social class information serves as an important cue in interpersonal social interactions and largely determines how people take action (Cheng Shuhua, Li Xin, & Han Yichu, 2017). People judge others' class through social class signals, compare it with their own class, and categorize others into in-groups or out-groups. When they find that their classes are more similar, subsequent interpersonal social interactions tend to develop in more positive directions. However, if social class signals reinforce boundaries and differences between in-groups and out-groups, interactions are more likely to suffer negative effects due to out-group prejudice (van Doesum et al., 2017).

For example, research has found that interpersonal trust levels are higher within low-class groups, and they provide more material resources to others who share similarly disadvantaged circumstances (such as 简陋的房屋和疾病等—simple housing and illness) (Navarro-Carrillo, Valor-Segura, & Moya, 2018). Another study found that when economy-class passengers must pass through first-class to reach their seats, the incidence of "air rage" incidents (such as conflicts between economy- and first-class passengers) increases by 2.18 times (DeCelles & Norton, 2016). Researchers believe that the presence of first-class makes economy passengers feel "inferior," rendering them "more depressed and impulsive" emotionally, while the presence of economy passengers makes first-class passengers feel "special," causing them to become "more selfish, bossy, and arrogant." In other words, the design distinction between first-class and economy-class serves as a social class signal that reinforces class (i.e., in-group/out-group) boundaries, making conflicts more likely during interpersonal interactions.

Another experimental study reached similar conclusions. Researchers divided adult participants into three groups based on educational attainment: primary school or below, secondary school, and university or above. Participants were asked to read passages describing several individuals and, based on limited information, answer two questions about each person: how much they liked the person and how similar they perceived the person to be to themselves. Among the described individuals was "William King," who "lives in a rented apartment and works as a convenience store clerk," and "Mohammed Hussain," who "attended university and works as a doctor." The results showed that highly educated participants held stronger prejudices, perceiving "Mohammed Hussain" as more similar to themselves and liking "William King" less (Kuppens, Spears, Manstead, Spruyt, & Easterbrook, 2018). Evidently, limited textual information as social class signals enabled participants to judge others' class (particularly educational attainment) and, through comparison with their own class, show preference for those closer to their own class, consistent with social identity theory.

4.1 Investigating the Weakening Function of Social Class Signals

Research has found that because conspicuous products (such as luxury cars and limited-edition brand-name bags) function as social class signals, low-class indi-

viduals often exhibit stronger demand for conspicuous consumption than high-class individuals, purchasing such products to make themselves appear more like upper-class members (Wang Chunxiao & Zhu Hong, 2016; Clingingsmith & Sheremeta, 2018). Conversely, high-class individuals show weaker demand for conspicuous consumption, and the original assumption that "wealthy people love to show off" has been challenged or even directly refuted in actual surveys —a considerable proportion of high-class individuals do not have a strong desire to "make their money, power, and status clear to others through consumption" (Makkar, 2014). Precisely for this reason, the "symbolic" and "signaling" functions of many externally visible social class signals, represented by conspicuous consumer goods, are actually being weakened. High-class individuals do not need to deliberately pursue conspicuous consumer goods with obvious signaling functions to express their class attributes, while a substantial portion of low-class individuals seek to "show off" through purchasing conspicuous consumer goods, attempting to display wealth and status they desire but do not actually possess. Increasing everyday experience tells people that those carrying limited-edition brand-name bags may very well come from working-class or even lower-class backgrounds. Therefore, the weakening function of social class signals, represented by conspicuous consumer goods, represents a viable direction for future research, which could proceed along two specific lines.

First, examine the extent to which the function of social class signals, represented by conspicuous consumer goods, has weakened. For example, investigate the degree to which people still rely on and believe that conspicuous consumer goods can represent others' social class; clarify which conspicuous consumer goods might have a reversed social class signal function, meaning that the more a product appears to belong to high-class groups, the more it might be considered a label for low-class groups; and test whether the legibility of conspicuous consumer goods (such as conspicuous brand labels) has weakened their function as social class signals.

Second, identify social class signals that are not easily "imitated" (such as good conversational style, moral cultivation, and educational background) and examine their impact on interpersonal-level social interactions. Since these less imitable social class signals are also less legible than conspicuous consumer goods used for "keeping up appearances," it is necessary to test the strength of their signaling function—that is, the extent to which they influence individuals' judgments of others' social class. On the other hand, precisely because these social class signals are not easily imitated, do they produce more stable and enduring effects on interpersonal social interactions? Investigating this question will also help us more deeply explore the essence of social class signals and their specific impacts on interpersonal social interactions.

4.2 Clarifying the Relationship Between Social Class Signals and Social Class

The concepts of social class signals and social class are highly correlated but essentially distinct. Specifically, social class is divided according to individuals' positions in the division of labor, authority hierarchies, production relations, and institutional segmentation (Lu Xueyi, 2002). Only in traditional acquaintance societies, where interaction partners frequently communicate face-to-face, know each other well, and engage in repeated interactions, can both parties adequately grasp each other' s social class and make interpersonal interaction decisions accordingly. However, in today' s increasingly "stranger society," people must face more others daily, receive and process massive amounts of information, and frequently engage in online interactions with strangers through phones and modern communication devices. This not only greatly increases cognitive load but also makes it more difficult to accurately learn about others' social class during brief contacts. Consequently, people increasingly rely on intuitive or automatic processing that saves cognitive resources when making interpersonal interaction decisions (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007), and this is when social class signals come into play.

Dual-process theory posits that people have two basic information processing modes: an "experiential-intuitive" mode (System 1) and a "rational-analytical" mode (System 2) (Evans, 2008). When people have comprehensive knowledge of others' social class, they often engage in "rational-analytical" processing through System 2. In stranger situations, especially under time pressure, they are more inclined to activate "experiential-intuitive" processing, making rapid judgments and taking action based on past experiences and intuition through subtle social class signals. Since these two information processing modes are substantially different, future research should elaborate on the corresponding differences between social class signals and social class in influencing interpersonal social interactions. We believe this distinction can be made along two dimensions: amount of information and time pressure. On one hand, the difference lies in the amount of information individuals possess: when clearly aware of others' social class, people' s interaction behaviors more closely follow System 2 processing patterns, whereas when unaware of others' social class, people rely more on social class signals to make experiential-intuitive responses, and the two may exert fundamentally different effects on individuals' interpersonal interaction behaviors. On the other hand, the impact on interpersonal-level social interactions may differ depending on time pressure: when time is abundant, people are more likely to spend time rationally analyzing others' social class and making interaction decisions, whereas when time is limited, people are more likely to process social class signals intuitively and respond behaviorally, thus potentially producing diametrically opposite effects on interpersonal-level social interactions. Of course, these distinctions await verification in future research to more comprehensively explain numerous social realities in contemporary China.

4.3 Exploring the Influence of Third-Party Social Class Signals in Interpersonal-Level Social Interactions

Although existing literature has deepened our understanding of how social class signals affect interpersonal social interactions, it also has limitations, among which the absence of a third-party perspective in interpersonal-level social interactions is particularly important. In fact, third parties beyond the interaction dyad (such as bystanders) often also influence individuals' interaction decision-making, making the question of how third-party social class signals affect interpersonal social interactions worthy of investigation.

For example, research could examine how bystanders' social class signals influence individuals' likelihood of providing help. An important cause of social indifference is the bystander effect, where potential helpers' expectations about bystanders' actions influence their own behavior (e.g., Abbate, Ruggieri, & Boca, 2013; Thomas, De Freitas, DeScioli, & Pinker, 2016). Some believe that "the rich are heartless," considering high-class individuals to be selfish and greedy, and thus may have lower expectations for high-class bystanders to take action, making them more likely to decide to act themselves. Conversely, "when poor, one should maintain integrity; when successful, one should benefit the world" is a principle held by many Chinese, who believe that high-class individuals have greater capacity and responsibility to help others. Based on this belief, people may have higher expectations for high-class bystanders to take action, making them more likely to decide not to act and potentially experience less guilt as a result. Accordingly, bystanders' social class signals may serve as contextual cues that influence potential helpers' likelihood of assisting those in need. Future research could test these hypotheses through field experiments and laboratory experiments. In summary, exploring the influence and mechanisms of third-party social class signals in interpersonal-level social interactions would represent an important advancement for social class psychology research.

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Author Contributions

Guo Rong: Drafted the manuscript, collected literature, wrote the initial draft, and participated in revisions.
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Abstract: Social class signs are a component of person perception about social class of others. People can determine another' s social class by processing these subtle social class signs, and another' s social class has a profound and extensive impact on interpersonal social interaction. This article used personal attire, facial features, and speaking characteristics as examples to illustrate that social class signs affect individual' s judgment of another' s social class. Moreover, we summarized the distinguishing influences of social class signs on interpersonal social interactions based on the perspectives of social exchange, social fairness, and social identity. It would be desirable to study if the functions of some social class signs are weakened because of the problem of conspicuous consumption. Regarding the relatively high relevance between social class signs and social class, it is necessary to explore the relation and distinction between these two constructs in future research. Given that few studies have examined the impacts of social class signs of a third party on interpersonal social interactions, it is important to expand the research from the interpersonal perspective to the third-party perspective.

Keywords: social class signs; interpersonal social interactions; social exchange; social fairness; social identity

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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