Identities in Context: How Social Class Shapes Inequalities in Education

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In a country that works for everyone it doesn't matter where you were born, or how much your parents earn. If you work hard and do the right thing, you will be able to go as far as you can.

Theresa May, British Academy speech, 2016.

To the teachers at the school it probably looked as if they didn't care enough even to turn up for Parents' Evening … But we understood our mothers a little better. We knew that they, in their own time, had feared school, just as we did now, feared the arbitrary rules and felt shamed by them, by the new uniforms they couldn't afford, the baffling obsession with quiet, the incessant correcting of their original patois or cockney, the sense that they could never do anything right anyway … And so 'Parent's Evening' was, in their minds, not so distant from 'detention'. It remained a place where they might be shamed.

Zadie Smith, Swing Time, 2016.

We are a long way from living in a society that provides equality of opportunity and a voice for everyone. On the contrary, we argue that our social and institutional structures preserve inequalities through subtle yet powerful processes that, for some groups in society, act as psychological barriers to engagement and success. This is particularly true of education. While many herald it as a social lever that offers equal opportunities for everyone, we argue that social and cultural factors deter and discourage some groups of students from striving to succeed in education, thus depriving them of the life chances that a successful education offers.

In this chapter, we outline the social and cultural characteristics and social identity processes that we argue drive social class[1] inequalities in education. There are,

[1] Although there are important differences between the different indicators of socioeconomic status and social class, here we use the term lower class as a general term indicating lower socioeconomic status and lower social class. We do this in order to be consistent in our writing throughout the chapter and to avoid getting side-tracked by technical discussions that could detract from our main focus of educational inequalities.

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J. Jetten, K. Peters (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Inequality*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28856-3_7

of course, structural factors that contribute to inequalities in education—children from poorer families have less access to high-quality schools, poorer nutrition, poorer housing, and cannot afford private tuition, to name only a few. Although these are outside the scope of this chapter, we conclude by reflecting on how our model suggests that the level of inequality within a society is likely to influence educational inequalities.

Educational Inequalities

During industrialization, societies moved away from awarding citizens social positions based on inherited rank and privilege and shifted toward basing them on characteristics that seemed naturally distributed between individuals: their abilities, ambition, and efforts. The idea that an individual—through hard work and self-reliance—could achieve social and economic success came to be seen as an equalizing principle, and equality of opportunity became a sacred value. Educational institutions began to assess and reward an individual's merit (for a review, see Autin, Batruch, & Butera, 2015; Batruch, Autin, & Butera, chapter "The Paradoxical Role of Meritocratic Selection in the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities at School"). As a result, a person's level of education has become a key determinant of their social status and is strongly associated with positive life outcomes, with higher education associated with better well-being and health, greater political engagement, and higher levels of social trust (Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Manstead, 2015).

Of course, just as higher levels of education are associated with beneficial outcomes and higher status, lower levels of education are associated with negative outcomes and stigma. Educationism—prejudice against those with low levels of education—seems to be one of the last acceptable prejudices in the Western societies (Kuppens, Spears, Manstead, Spruyt, & Easterbrook, 2017). Indeed, one could argue that level of education is becoming a pivotal social divide within the Western societies; it is among the variables most predictive of civic behavior and political involvement (Malligan, Moretti, & Oreopoulos, 2004), and is perceived by many as being a crucial factor that drove voting patterns within the 2016 US presidential election (Tylson & Maniam, 2016) and the UK's Brexit referendum (Zhang, 2018), regardless of whether or not that was actually the case (Jetten, 2018).

Despite the common perception that education is a social equalizer that epitomizes the idea of equality of opportunities, some groups systematically underperform in and disengage from education. In the USA, African Americans and Latinos do not, on average, achieve or progress within education to the same level as their European American counterparts, and this contributes to a range of major economic, social, and material inequalities between those groups. In the UK, where our research is conducted, the primary driver of educational inequalities is social class. Here, school students who qualify for free school meals—an indicator of economic disadvantage—are only around half as likely as their better-off peers to achieve what the government considers to be a good level of academic achievement (Department for Education, 2015). These educational inequalities in social class are

present from the earliest stages of school and increase thereafter: disadvantaged students lag behind their peers by about 4 months' progress at age four, which increases to over 19 months by the time they are age 16 (Andrews, Robinson, & Hutchinson, 2017; see also Rubin, Evans, & McGuffog, chapter "Social Class Differences in Social Integration at University: Implications for Academic Outcomes and Mental Health"). What is more, these inequalities are not solely explained by differences in academic ability between school students (Machin & Vignoles, 2005).

Beyond school, students who were eligible for free school meals are about half as likely to go to university (UCAS, 2017) and, if they do, are more likely to drop out (Arulampalam, Naylor, & Smith, 2005) or leave with lower grades than their wealthier counterparts. Importantly, however, it seems that it is not just ability that drives these inequalities: even among pupils whose exam results are within the top 20% nationally, lower-class pupils are much less likely to go to the highest-status universities than their better-off peers (Jerrim, Chmielewski, & Parker, 2015). Indeed, similar gaps have been found in the non-cognitive or "soft" skills that are critical to success in school and later life—including a sense of belonging, intrinsic motivation, academic aspirations, and self-esteem (Bandura & Caprara, 1996; Heckman, 2011; Rubin, 2012).

In this chapter, we attempt to explain how social and cultural factors prominent in the local educational context—and the social identity processes that these ignite—contribute to educational inequalities between people of different social classes. We also introduce a new model: The identities-in-context model of educational inequalities. The model is based on our own research and our reading of others', and is a work in process to be updated as the field progresses. While this chapter focuses on class-based educational inequalities, we expect that the model will help to explain educational inequalities between other groups such as those reflecting ethnicity and gender, an idea that we develop in the final section. We also draw on our model to suggest how the level of inequality within a society affects the educational inequalities within it.

The Identities-in-Context Model of Educational Inequalities

Educational inequalities between groups are not uniform; they vary across contexts. For example, the ethnicity achievement gap is much larger in the USA than the UK, and—within the UK—the social class achievement gap varies across geographical regions: from 19% in London to 34% in the South East (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017). To understand this variation, we suggest that researchers must try to understand the meaning of the group's social identity—to the group and to others—within the *local educational context* by assessing the social and cultural characteristics that are prominent, salient, and relevant to the group within that local context.

We argue that these social and cultural factors interact with individuals' *social identities* to produce radically different subjective experiences for members of different social groups (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). For example, someone who grew up

in a poor neighborhood is likely to have a very different subjective experience of a top university than someone who grew up in a wealthy neighborhood, partly because they interpret university through the lens of their class-based social identities, and partly because of how those identities are interpreted by the universities and wider society *within the context of education.*

The identities-in-context model, shown in Fig. 1, places class-based social identities at the start of the causal chain. These identities act as a lens through which individuals perceive their local educational context, rendering certain features of the context—the social and cultural factors—self-relevant and meaningful. If the social and cultural factors identified in the model are present, salient, and relevant to the group in question, the model suggests that they lead to a sense of social identity threat and a perception that one's class-based social identities are incompatible with educational success, engagement, and progression. These in turn fuel inequalities in performance, aspiration, and self-beliefs (such as belonging and self-efficacy).

The key social and cultural factors that in our view contribute to educational inequalities between groups are the prevalence of negative stereotypes and expectations about a group's educational performance, the representation of the group within education, and the group's disposition toward education. These lead to important differences in how different groups subjectively experience their local educational context, which in turn contribute to differences in academic outcomes.

Class-Based Social Identities

As Leon Festinger (1954) pointed out in his social comparison theory, when we are making important decisions about our lives and there are no objective indicators of what we should do (and there hardly ever are), we look around us to see what people like us have done (see also Brown-Iannuzzi & McKee, chapter "Economic Inequality

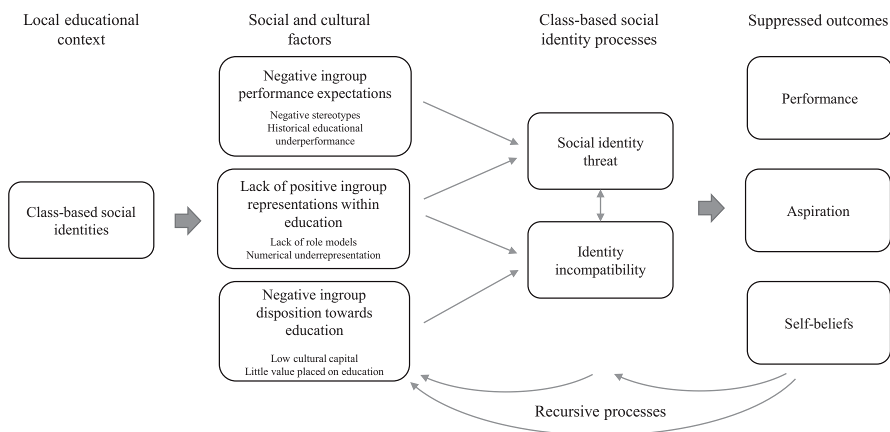

Fig. 1 The identities-in-context model of educational inequalities, applied to social class

and Risk-Taking Behaviors"). What do people like me do with their lives? What have people like me achieved? What are people like me good at? The answers to questions such as these are used to understand what is a realistic path that we can take, and what we might be able to become in the future (Oyserman & James, 2011).

The concept of *social identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) is key to our understanding here: *people like us* are the people with whom we share a social identity. Most children's and adolescents' social identities are strongly rooted to their family, community, and neighborhood (Bennett & Sani, 2008)—where they live, where they go to school, what they do, and the people they see every day—all of which are tightly intertwined with their social class. Social class is therefore integral to people's understanding of who they are and forms the foundation upon which some of their most meaningful social identities are based.

Some examples serve to illustrate our point. Imagine a young teenager whose family members left school at 16 and who lives in a neighborhood where hardly anyone went on to college or university. She will look around her and, if she thinks about university at all, is likely to think that *going to university is not something people like me do. It's not relevant to my life.* It is very hard for her to imagine or understand *how* she might move from her current position to one of educational success, or to imagine herself as a future graduate. In the language of social identity theory, she cannot imagine cognitive alternatives to the status quo (Iyer, Zhang, Jetten, Hao, & Cui, 2017). No one she knows or feels similar to has taken that path, and it therefore does not seem to be a viable, accessible, or relevant route (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

People's social identities therefore have consequences for how they orientate themselves toward education. People from lower social classes are likely to feel unwanted, stigmatized, and threatened by the stereotypes that apply to them and their group—they experience a sense of *social identity threat*. They are also likely to feel that they are not the type of person who does well in school or progresses in education—they experience a sense of *identity incompatibility*. We now describe the consequences of these two social identity processes in more detail.

Social Identity Threat

Imagine Jim who lives on a public housing estate and whose parents are on a low income. People do not expect students like him to achieve much at school, and he knows it. He sees each academic setback, each poor mark or piece of critical feedback from a teacher, as evidence that school is not for people like him. Tests and exams stress him out and the threat of failure pervades; he loses the belief that he can succeed. Expectations lower, and steady academic decline ensues. Jim loses interest in education and psychologically disengages from school, which relieves some of his anxiety.

Jim is experiencing a phenomenon known as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995): a sense of threat that people feel in a given context when they believe that they risk conforming to a negative stereotype about a group of which they are a member. In other words, individuals suffer from stereotype threat when they perceive that their social identity is negatively valued within a particular domain, and that they are at risk of confirming that negative value: stereotype threat can therefore be understood as threat to one's social identity.

Stereotype threat has been shown to apply to lower-class students within education. In one study, French undergraduate students were given a difficult verbal test (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Only when the test was portrayed as being diagnostic of intellectual ability (and thereby eliciting fears of confirming a negative stereotype) did students from lower-class backgrounds perform worse than those from higher-class backgrounds. Another study found that asking school students to raise their hands in class once they had an answer to a question—rendering performance visible to others—decreased lower-class students' performance (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; chapter "Education and Social Class: Highlighting How the Educational System Perpetuates Social Inequality"). In these studies, the manipulation did not reduce the performance of middle-class pupils, since their social identity was not negatively valued nor subject to a negative stereotype, and so they did not suffer from stereotype or social identity threat. Other studies have found similar effects among lower-class students ranging in age from six-year-olds to college students (Browman, Destin, Carswell, & Svoboda, 2017; Désert, Préaux, & Jund, 2009; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Spencer & Castano, 2007). Indeed, this sense of threat has been estimated to account for up to 28% of group-based attainment gaps (Walton & Spencer, 2009).

Identity Incompatibility

Recall our teenager whose family and social circle all left school at 16. She is likely to see a mismatch between the identities rooted to her social class (e.g., family and neighborhood) and the identity that she believes is held by someone who works hard at school or who is a university student. This is reflected in research findings: one study (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009) found that working-class secondary school students—in comparison to middle-class students—were more likely to feel that their social background was incompatible with being a university student, and less likely to expect to feel connected to other university students.

Our own research has extended these findings. In an ongoing program of research, we have found that 14- to 16-year-old school pupils in the UK who were eligible for free school meals reported feeling that their social backgrounds were incompatible with doing well in school. Furthermore, this was associated with weaker academic self-beliefs such as self-efficacy, and poorer performance on national exams (known as GCSEs), *even after accounting for previous exam results* (Easterbrook, Nieuwenhuis, Fox, Harris, & Banerjee, 2018).

Identity compatibility is also related to the rank of the universities to which school students apply (Nieuwenhuis, Manstead, & Easterbrook, 2019). In two studies, we found that students whose parents had low levels of educational attainment scored lower on identity compatibility, and that this was associated with a belief that they would be less likely to be accepted at two prestigious local universities. This belief, in turn, predicted the league table ranking of the university to which the students planned to apply, with those who believed they would be less accepted at the prestigious universities intending to apply to lower ranked universities. Crucially, these relations were maintained even when we took account of their academic achievement.

A sense that one's class-based identities are incompatible with doing well or progressing in education therefore seems to be a psychological barrier to educational achievement and progress for those from lower social classes in the UK.

Social and Cultural Factors

When do lower-class students have lower levels of identity compatibility and suffer from stereotype threat? In line with the identity-in-context model, we argue that this occurs when one or more of the following social and cultural factors are salient within the local context: expectations are prevalent that lower-class students will underperform in education; lower-class students are not positively represented within education; and lower class families are not positively disposed toward education. When some or all of these social and cultural factors are prominent, we suggest that they interact with the class-based social identities of lower-class students to ignite feelings of identity incompatibility and social identity threat, thus fueling class-based educational inequalities. We now discuss each of these social and cultural factors in turn.

Negative In-Group Performance Expectations

Negative Stereotypes There are prominent negative stereotypes about the educational performance of some groups, which imply that these groups have low status within that context. Those from lower social classes are subject to such negative stereotypes in part because most western societies endorse a meritocratic ideology, which holds that an individual's status is a direct consequence of their individual ability and effort. This ideology legitimizes inequality by placing blame on those with low status for their low-status position (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Jackman, 1994; Kuppens et al., 2017) and feeds into prominent stereotypes that those who are in the lower social classes have lower intelligence and are less competent (Durante & Fiske, 2017; Fiske & Durante, chapter "Mutual Status Stereotypes Maintain Inequality").

There are many examples of the negative stereotypes that apply to those from lower social classes. For example, in the UK, several popular television programs have portrayed families on low incomes or benefits as being lazy and lacking motivation to engage in economic activity (e.g., People Like Us, Benefits Street, Skint; see also Augoustinos & Callaghan, chapter "The Language of Social Inequality"; Jones, 2011). Although little work has directly investigated the consequences of such media, there is evidence that media portrayals are readily internalized (Brown & Dittmar, 2005) and filter down into awareness and social attitudes (Diermeier, Goecke, & Niehues, 2017). Indeed, supporting this suggestion, one study found that Swedish respondents described the stereotypes about "poor citizens" using terms such as "lazy," "uneducated," "unintelligent," "dishonest," and "work-shy" (Lindqvist, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2017). Other work has shown that people associate derogatory lower-class labels—such as chavs in the UK, bogans in Australia, and white trash in the USA—with animal traits (Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2013). Moreover, Shutts, Brey, Dornbusch, Slywotzky, and Olson (2016) found that children as young as four expected ostensibly wealthy children to be more popular and to be less likely to make a mistake in a coloring task than ostensibly poor children. Awareness of these negative stereotypes by lower-class students is likely to indicate to them that people like them are not valued within education, and thus induce a sense of stereotype threat. This can trigger anxiety, defensive mechanisms such as disengagement, and/or use up cognitive resources, all of which act as additional barriers that impede lower-class students from achieving their potential within education.

Such stereotypes not only elicit stereotype threat among lower-class students but are also perceived as prescriptive by those working within education. People not only come to expect members of the lower classes to perform poorly in their exams and leave education early, but are often biased in ways that help to make these expectations a reality. For example, one study found that teachers gave a lower mark to an *identical* essay when there were subtle cues that the student who wrote it was from a lower-class background (Batruch, Autin, & Butera, 2017; chapter "The Paradoxical Role of Meritocratic Selection in the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities at School"), suggesting that teachers' expectations about the performance of pupils from different social classes influence their judgement of students in ways that reinforce those stereotypes.

Historical Educational Underperformance Evidence also suggests that stereotype threat can be ignited—and thus a group's social identity threatened or an existing threat exacerbated—if group members are confronted with *objective evidence* that their group has previously underperformed. One study (Leyens, Desert, Croizet, & Darcis, 2000), for instance, found that men who were told that males historically underperformed on an affective processing task made more errors on the task compared to men who were not told this. The manipulation did not affect the men's performance on other tasks, nor the performance of women. Furthermore, some researchers have found that an intervention that has been shown to reduce the inimical effects of stereotype threat was only effective for potentially-stereotyped groups

(in this case, Black and Hispanic students in the USA) when those groups had previously performed poorly in comparison to White students in the local context (Borman, Grigg, Rozek, Hanselman, & Dewey, 2018; Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). This suggests that stereotype threat can be elicited or exacerbated by objective evidence of group underperformance within the *immediate context*, even in the absence of a prevalent negative stereotype.

Lack of Positive In-Group Representations Within Education

As our examples have illustrated, the routes that people take in life are heavily influenced by their perceptions of what *people like them* have done. These perceptions have two core sources that apply to education: people's awareness of successful in-group members (role models), and the number of in-group members that people can see in high-achieving institutions (numerical representation).

Role Models When lower-class students see people like them—people from similar families, neighborhoods, or communities—who have done well in education, they are more likely to believe that they themselves could follow the same path. They come to see their academic work as a path to success and as consistent with who they are. As a result, they are more likely to engage with school and to see the inevitable difficulties as something they can overcome (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Without such role models, a successful path through education may not seem viable.

Although lower-class students may be exposed to many individuals who have gone to university and succeeded in education (teachers, celebrities etc.), they are likely to have limited exposure to *in-group members with whom they identify* who have done so: their own family members, close friends, and members of their local community. This is the crucial ingredient that makes role models beneficial (Dasgupta, 2011; Turner, 2006). Indeed, evidence has shown that merely being aware of role models does not automatically increase educational success (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010), and that role models who are presented as exceptions rather than as typical in-group members are unlikely to be motivating because their trajectory and success is not perceived as self-relevant (Gibson & Cordova, 1999).

This may be especially relevant to lower-class students because those from lower-class backgrounds, who do achieve and progress in education, may disassociate themselves from their lower-class background—and the social identities associated with it—as a way of reinforcing their new higher-status position (representing a form of social mobility; Ellemers, van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988; Van Laar, Derks, Ellemers, & Bleeker, 2010). Thus, those from lower-class backgrounds who have been successful in education might not be perceived as (or perceive themselves to be) typical in-group members by lower-class students.

This can be overcome if individuals from lower-class backgrounds who have been successful in education are open about their past and their life story and make

themselves visible to lower-class students. For example, in one study, Latino school students—for whom studying Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) subjects tends to be perceived as incompatible with their background—who attended a talk by a successful Latino aerospace engineer were more likely to believe that someone from their background could become a scientist, compared to those who did not attend the talk (Hernandez, Rana, Rao, & Usselman, 2017).

Our own work has applied these ideas to social class. We first created a new measure that specifically taps into the importance of role models being *people like me*: respondents are asked how strongly they agree with statements such as *I know personally some people who benefited from going to university.* Our results to date have shown that working-class 16- to 18-year-old UK college students, who were more aware of role models from their background, reported higher levels of identity compatibility and belonging to college, and, in turn, higher academic self-belief and fewer academic concerns (Easterbrook, 2018; Easterbrook et al., 2018).

Numerical Underrepresentation Imagine a working-class teenager who is considering applying to a prestigious university and who attends an open day at that university. He looks around and sees hardly anyone with whom he identifies; everyone is wearing different clothes, acting differently, and even speaking differently to what he is used to and feels comfortable with. He interprets all this as a sign that he is not welcome there and that he will not fit in: that his social identity is not valued within this context.

As this example shows, being in a minority is likely to reduce the comfort and ease that people feel in a situation. Because lower SES students are less likely to attend high-ranking universities and are thus underrepresented within them, they tend to perceive high-ranking universities as less welcoming to *people like me* and expect to feel less accepted by them (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019).

However, the research suggests that numerical underrepresentation within education may not by itself lead to underperformance but does so only if it is coupled with a negative expectation about the group in question. For instance, research has shown that female—but not male—students' performance in math tests suffers as the proportion of males in their class increases (Flore & Wicherts, 2015; Inzlicht & Ben-zeev, 2000). Other studies found that an intervention that reduces the negative consequences of stereotype threat was only effective for potentially-stereotyped group members when they were in a numerical minority *and* had historically underperformed (Borman et al., 2018; Hanselman et al., 2014), suggesting that stereotype threat may only be elicited when underrepresentation is coupled with prior poor performance. These studies suggest that a lack of numerical representation exacerbates any pre-existing concerns that individuals have about fitting in rather than being a primary cause, although direct tests of this hypothesis are needed before we can draw firm conclusions.

Although there is little direct evidence of a negative psychological impact of low numerical representation on economically disadvantaged individuals, there is some evidence consistent with it. Lower-class students in England make significantly less

academic progress in primary schools where they are in a particularly small minority, and there is a similar but less pronounced effect in secondary schools (Hutchinson, Dunford, & Treadaway, 2016; but see Schweinle & Mims, 2009).

Negative In-Group Disposition Toward Education

Cultural Capital Although "culture" is usually taken to refer to social and cultural differences between nations, researchers have suggested different classes occupy different cultures (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Those in different classes have different life experiences, prioritize different values, abide by different norms, and base their decisions on different factors, which influence how they navigate life and interact with various cultural institutions. As we describe below, the culture within lower-class communities is often at odds with the culture that is adopted by and promoted within educational institutions. This disadvantages lower class students, partly because it elicits the social identity processes that we outlined above.

Perhaps the most influential theory about class culture is that of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985). He described how social classes consume different cultural, material, and aesthetic products, and become socialized toward different social and cultural institutions. Bourdieu argued that, because the education system has traditionally been the realm of the middle and upper classes, educational institutions are steeped in the values of those classes. Members of those higher classes therefore feel comfortable within educational institutions and understand how to navigate them successfully. Bourdieu termed this tacit understanding of and orientation toward higher-status institutions *cultural capital.*

Bourdieu argues that the cultural capital that orientates the higher-classes toward higher-status institutions often goes unnoticed. This is because people in the Western societies tend to endorse the ideology of meritocracy and perceive education to embody the principle of equality of opportunity, leaving little room for class-based privileges to be perceived. This is why Bourdieu claims that cultural capital is "a social gift treated as a natural one" (Bourdieu 1974. p32): educational institutions are set up in ways that privilege the higher classes, yet most people believe that it is through the intelligence and hard work of individuals that educational success is achieved (Batruch et al., chapter "The Paradoxical Role of Meritocratic Selection in the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities at School").

Stephens and colleagues (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) have linked differences in cultural capital to a sense of identity compatibility and academic performance among US university students. They found that both middle-class students and administrators in top universities prioritized values that emphasized *independence*, such as expressing oneself and working independently. In contrast, working-class students' values emphasized *interdependence:* they were more likely to value working with others and helping their family. This clash in the value priori-

ties held by working-class students and those prioritized by universities fuels a sense of threat and incompatibility among working class students. Stephens and colleagues demonstrated this in several studies by presenting working- and middle-class university students with one of two welcome letters from their university (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). One emphasized independence, outlining how students were expected to learn by exploring their own interests, expressing their own ideas and opinions, and participating in independent research. The other letter emphasized interdependence, focusing instead on how students would learn by being part of a community, connecting with fellow students and faculty, and participating in collaborative research. Among those who read the independent-focused letter, working-class students (relative to middle-class students) showed higher levels of cortisol, indicating higher stress levels and performed worse on difficult tasks. However, these differences were eliminated in the group that read the letter emphasizing interdependence.

Although this research was conducted in the USA, we have begun to conduct similar research in the UK. Our results to date (Easterbrook, 2018) show that students attending colleges in more economically deprived areas are more likely to prioritize interdependent over independent reasons for going to university, and that the extent to which they do so predicts how much they expect to feel like they do not belong at university.

Little Value Placed on Education A lack of cultural capital among lower-class families can make lower-class students feel like they do not understand the culture nor fit in at university, and therefore fuel a sense of incompatibility and threat. But it can also affect parents. Some parents who have low levels of cultural capital may have felt uncomfortable and even alienated when they were at school and may still feel the same unease when their own children enter the education system (recall the second quote at the beginning of this chapter). This can lead them to place a low value on education (Heckman, 2011), to expect less from their child's education (Shanks & Destin, 2009; Zhan, 2006), and to be less involved and engaged in it (Te Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Williams Shanks & Destin, 2009). This is particularly problematic because parental involvement has a strong impact on children's school outcomes across all ages (Huat See & Gorard, 2015). If parents do not value education or get involved in their children's education, their children are likely to absorb these dispositions and reflect them within their own values and social identities, fueling a sense of identity incompatibility and social identity threat. Lower-class families' disposition toward education, whether tacit (cultural capital) or explicit (how much value they place on education), underpins class-based educational inequalities and perpetuates them from generation to generation.

Practical Use of the Identities-in-Context Model

In this chapter, we have argued that students interpret the local educational context through their class-based social identities, and that, when the social and cultural factors outlined in the model are prevalent in the local context, lower-class students experience a sense of identity incompatibility and social identity threat that leads to lower performance, motivation, and self-beliefs. However, the model is not limited to class-based inequalities and should aid our understanding of inequalities in education between any groups subject to the social and cultural factors outlined in the model. At this point, we would like to suggest how the model may be able to inform future attempts to reduce educational inequalities.

There is now a considerable literature on interventions that target specific psychological processes to address social issues, including educational inequalities (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; Walton, 2014; Yeager & Walton, 2011). However, the effectiveness of many of these interventions seems to vary across contexts because of environmental factors that in some cases are not yet well understood. This makes it premature to base policy recommendations and large-scale implementation on the evidence that is currently available. The identities-in-context model is our attempt to provide a theory-based framework for understanding this contextual variation.

We suggest that researchers should gain an understanding of the social and cultural factors specified in the model within their local educational context before choosing or designing an intervention. If the factors are present and applicable to a particular group within the local context (e.g., if a group has few role models within the local context), then we suggest that *social psychological interventions that target the social identity processes outlined in the model are likely to be effective at reducing the educational inequalities for that group in that context.* If the factors are absent or do not apply to the focal group, then social psychological interventions of this kind are unlikely to be successful.

An illustrative example may help here. Values affirmation, also known as self-affirmation, is a promising intervention that can alleviate the negative consequences of stereotype threat and thus reduce educational achievement gaps (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The intervention usually involves a few simple writing exercises, strategically placed throughout the year, in which pupils write about their most important values. This is thought to encourage them to view the threat within the broader context of their lives, reducing its salience and severity. One of the first and most high-profile values affirmation studies—conducted in a US high school by Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006)—found that the intervention reduced the achievement gap between African Americans and European Americans by 40%. Our own research recently examined the impact of values affirmation in a secondary school in England (Hadden, Easterbrook, Nieuwenhuis, Fox, & Dolan, 2019). Students from low-income families who performed the values affirmation reported lower levels of stress and closed the gap in maths performance

with their better-off peers by 62%. Yet, in contrast to Cohen's study, we found no effect of the affirmation on the performance of ethnic minorities.

We suggest that this variation is due to differences in the social and cultural factors within the local educational contexts in the two studies. Cohen and colleagues' study, for instance, was conducted in the USA, where African Americans are underrepresented in high-status roles and subject to negative stereotypes about their academic ability. Within the school in which the study was conducted, African Americans had consistently underperformed in comparison to whites. The presence of these social and cultural factors within the school is likely to threaten the social identity of African Americans so that an intervention that reduces the consequences of stereotype- or social identity-threat is likely to be effective for that group.

Although ethnicity is also a salient issue in the UK, British society has historically been segregated more by social class than ethnicity, and negative stereotypes about lower-class people abound (Jones, 2011). Within the school that our study was conducted in, lower-class students had consistently performed worse than higher-class students, with an achievement gap that was much larger than that based on ethnicity. We expected therefore that the social and cultural factors would be more relevant to lower-class students than ethnic minority students in the UK context, and so the values affirmation intervention would be more likely to benefit lower-class students. Researchers have begun to quantify some of these social and cultural factors. For example, two recent values affirmation studies found that the intervention was only effective for ethnic minority students if there was a preexisting achievement gap between ethnic groups *and* the group was numerically underrepresented (Borman et al., 2018; Hanselman et al., 2014).

Our model provides an overview on how social and cultural factors within local educational contexts influence educational inequalities. However, it is also important to recognize that the wider societal context—and particularly the level of economic inequality in the society—is also likely to influence the prevalence and importance of the social and cultural factors. In more unequal societies, for instance, people perceive low-status individuals to have less merit and worth (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017), suggesting there may be more negative expectations toward those with low status. Furthermore, those in more unequal societies show a greater endorsement of ambivalent stereotypes that function to legitimize the status quo; they perceive the rich as more competent but less warm, and the poor as less competent and but warmer (Fiske & Durante, chapter "Mutual Status Stereotypes Maintain Inequality"). Our model predicts that this greater endorsement of ambivalent stereotypes is likely to lead to a greater sense of threat among those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in areas where competence is valued, such as education. This would in turn lead to greater educational inequalities. Furthermore, through long-term recursive processes, these initial increases in stereotype threat could lead lower-class students to defensively disengage from educational domains, and lower-class families to become more and more negatively disposed toward education. Thus, the level of economic inequality in a society may amplify or inhibit certain social and cultural factors and thereby exacerbate educational inequalities between social classes. Indeed, these predictions are in line with research that has

found that greater societal inequality amplifies the gender performance gap in mathematics (Breda, Jouini, & Napp, 2018).

Our model provides a theoretical framework that should help to progress social psychological research into educational inequalities and that encourages researchers to be sensitive to the social and cultural context when designing and choosing educational interventions. Ultimately, we hope that our model contributes to work that eventually reduces the psychological barriers faced by some of the most disadvantaged groups in our society, helping them to achieve their potential and reap the benefits of a successful education.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Tony Manstead for his helpful comments on a previous version of the chapter.

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