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Trust and Trust Funds: How Others' Childhood and Current Social Class Context Influence Trust Behavior and Expectations

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Trust is vital for success in all kinds of social interactions. But how do people decide whether an individual can be trusted? One factor people may consider is that individual's social class. We hypothesize that people trust others from lower social class contexts more than others from higher class contexts; we also consider nuances between current and childhood class context and between trust as a behavior and trust as an expectation. Five preregistered studies (total $N = 1{,}934$, with three of five studies including a within-subjects component), and 12 preregistered replications summarized in the supplement, yielded two sets of findings. First, people consistently behaviorally trusted others whose *childhoods* were spent in low-class (compared to high-class) contexts and expected them to honor that trust. These effects were mediated by perceived morality. Second, people behaviorally trusted others *currently* in low-class (compared to high-class) contexts, but they did not expect these individuals to honor that trust or perceive them as moral. Instead, the effect of current class was linked to altruism. Our findings emerged in samples drawn from different populations, across varying manipulations of social class, in actual and hypothetical decisions, and with imaginary targets and real acquaintances. We consider implications for the psychology of trust and of social class.

Keywords: social class, socioeconomic status, trust, stereotypes, economic games

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000497.supp

Trust is vital for effective, positive social interactions (Deutsch, 1958; Dunning et al., 2014; Fiske, 2002; Simpson, 2007; Stolle, 2002; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Without trust, romantic relationships break up (Le et al., 2010), workplace cultures break down (Kramer, 1999), and factions break out (Ives, 2021). Trust can guide how people resolve social dilemmas: Whether to depend on one another to accomplish more, help each other, and have meaningful relationships, or go it alone to avoid exploitation and rejection (e.g., Kumashiro et al., 2002; Wieselquist et al., 1999).

We ask whether people place more trust in others from lower social class contexts or from higher class contexts. We initially entertained both hypotheses; our findings most strongly supported the former. They also revealed differences between *childhood* and *current* social class and between trust as a *behavior* and trust as an *expectation* (Evans & Krueger, 2009; Rousseau et al., 1998). As research on social class moves beyond a deficit model to one that recognizes the personal strengths that lower class contexts can impart (Gorski, 2011, 2016; see also Belmi et al., 2024;

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All studies were preregistered. All preregistrations, materials, data, and analysis code are available online at https://osf.io/kjnyh/. See wiki section for guidance on where to find components for each study. The data have not been used in any previous publications, but some have been the subject of conference presentations and included in Holly R. Engstrom's doctoral dissertation. The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Wingrove et al., 2023), our work suggests these contexts may also confer some social advantages, contributing to a richer understanding of socioeconomic inequalities. Our theorizing and hypotheses grew more nuanced over time as we updated them based on new data; what follows describes that iterative process.

Deciding Whom to Trust

Trust is defined as both a behavior—accepting vulnerability with respect to another person—and as an expectation—that this person will reward rather than exploit one's vulnerability (Evans & Krueger, 2009; Rousseau et al., 1998). Features of the *truster* can determine how much they trust others: Some people are in general more willing to accept positions of vulnerability and to have positive expectations of others, for dispositional (Putnam, 2000; Trautmann et al., 2013; Uslaner, 2002), cultural (e.g., Klein et al., 2019), or contextual (Dahlhaus & Schlösser, 2021) reasons. Here, though, we sought to examine a feature of the *trustee* (e.g., Everett et al., 2016; Kong, 2018): How does their social class context determine how much people trust them? Broad stereotypes about morality support the hypothesis that individuals from lower versus higher class contexts will benefit from more trust.

Morality and Trust

When considering a new person, people want to know about their moral character: Are they a kind, honest, and ethical person (Brambilla et al., 2011; Goodwin et al., 2014; Landy et al., 2016)? In models of social judgment and stereotyping, morality and sociability comprise the broader category of warmth: an individual's intentions for cooperative behavior (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Cuddy et al., 2008).

Morality features prominently in models of trust decisions (Arikewuyo et al., 2021; Berg et al., 1995; Connelly et al., 2015; Earle & Siegrist, 2006; Rempel et al., 1985). By definition, a trustee can exploit the truster for personal benefit, so trusters typically want to minimize the risk that their trustee has malevolent intentions. Imagine a homeowner seeking a house sitter. If they hire someone with questionable ethics, that person could use the home to host raucous parties or pilfer its contents. Or imagine a project manager who falls ill and needs to rely on a colleague to deliver a presentation on their behalf. A greedy colleague could claim undue credit for the work. Thus, when people make trust decisions, they are concerned with choosing moral people.

Morality Stereotypes, Social Class Contexts, and Our Primary Hypothesis

Trusters may estimate morality by relying on stereotypes (Ames, 2004; Burnett et al., 2010; Kong, 2018; Walker et al., 2022). Ample findings describe stereotypes based on social class (e.g., Christopher & Schlenker, 2000; Durante et al., 2014; Ragusa, 2015), defined as the combination of income, education, and occupational prestige (Adler et al., 1994; Cohen et al., 2017; Manstead, 2018). This work suggests people from lower, compared to higher, class contexts are perceived as warmer (though less agentic), and thus more moral (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2014). Conversely, people stereotype the upper class as cold, out of touch, arrogant, and selfish—that is, as not particularly moral (though competent; Sainz et al., 2018, 2019; Zitelmann, 2020).

If trusters are concerned with potential trustees' morality, social class stereotypes could cause them to trust others from lower (vs. higher) class contexts. We began our research with two goals: The first was to test this primary hypothesis: that people are especially trusting of others from lower class contexts; the second was to evaluate the morality stereotype mechanism.

Existing Evidence and an Alternative Hypothesis

Four existing experiments assessed trust toward targets varying in social class (Brülhart & Usunier, 2012; Lindqvist & Björklund, 2017; Lount & Pettit, 2012; Qi et al., 2018), all using the trust game (Berg et al., 1995), the most widely cited behavioral measure of trust. In this game, participants can transfer any portion of their starting endowment to a partner; this is then tripled, and the partner may return any of that tripled amounts. The amount of the initial transfer quantifies trust: People transfer more money when they expect to get back a fair portion of the sweetened pot.

These four experiments yielded mixed findings: One favored trust for higher class targets, one for lower class targets, the other two no difference. This mix is even more difficult to interpret in light of the experiments' low power (each fell below 30% for d of 0.20). Nonetheless, they prompted us to initially consider an alternative hypothesis: That people might be especially trusting of others from *higher* class contexts. Some reasoning supports this. By definition, trustees can gain something by exploiting the truster's vulnerability, and sometimes (as in the trust game) the potential gain is pecuniary: The house sitter could steal valuable items; the credit-claiming colleague could receive a promotion. People may worry that the financial insecurity of lower class contexts could tempt those in them to betray (see Smalarz et al., 2016). Conversely, people may perceive that wealthier trustees feel that temptation less acutely (Sugiyama & Sugiyama, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Consistent with these ideas, a recent article found that when home decor signaled wealth, compared to poverty, people assume its inhabitants are more cooperative (Boon-Falleur et al., 2024; see also Williams et al., 2016).

To give this alternative hypothesis—greater trust for targets from *higher* class contexts—a chance, our studies focus primarily on cases where dishonorable trustees stand to make material profit.

Varieties of Social Class: Current Versus Childhood

Following recent work (e.g., Laurin et al., 2024; Martin & Côté, 2019), our research evolved to consider the distinction between a target's *current* (see also Kraus et al., 2013) and *childhood* (see also Stephens & Townsend, 2013) social class. These two contexts are associated with different internal experiences. For example, a sense of high social class that is based on one's current situation is linked with agreeableness and emotional stability (Laurin et al., 2024). One that is instead rooted in one's childhood and family background is linked with entitlement and narcissism (Côté et al., 2021).

A closer look at work on class stereotypes—the basis for our primary hypothesis—reveals that it rarely specifies the timing of targets' standing, leaving room for ambiguity. For example, when people generate the term "selfish" to describe "the rich" (Ragusa, 2015), do they mean this in reference to the upwardly mobile who

attained wealth as adults, those who come from old money, or both (Freeland, 2012)? Only one investigation precluded this ambiguity, finding more positive impressions (including higher warmth and morality) of an upwardly mobile target compared to a stably wealthy one (Koo et al., 2023). However, this investigation's targets were all currently wealthy, so its findings might reflect a morality stereotype specific to the upwardly mobile, or one that applies to people from low-childhood-class contexts regardless of current context.

In short, no work systematically examines morality stereotypes associated with current and childhood class contexts, but intuitively they might be distinct. People may believe that morality develops in one's childhood environment and remains stable over the lifespan. As well or instead, people may believe that wealth corrupts, or that morality responds to current conditions like norms and needs. Without existing work validating these speculations, we made no prediction: People might perceive as moral and, therefore, trust others from low-current-class contexts, low-childhood-class contexts, or both. Thus, the third goal of our work was to test how current and childhood class contexts, together or separately, influence trust.

Varieties of Trust: Behavior Versus Expectations

We initially prioritized behavioral measures of trust, the trust game in particular, reasoning this game would minimize social desirability, recall, and other biases. But the literature distinguishes trust behavior (accepting vulnerability) from trust expectations (believing that others will honor that vulnerability; Hardin, 2002). This distinction matters, because trust behavior *can* be the external manifestation of trust expectations, but it can also be driven by other factors (Chetty et al., 2021; Fehr, 2009), like a desire to be altruistic (Cox, 2004; McEvily et al., 2012). Altruism is a salient motive in the trust game, wherein trust behavior entails sending money to a partner, but it can guide trust in the real world too: A homeowner might hire the sitter who could most use the extra cash. Yet another motive for trust behavior can be social obligation (Dunning et al., 2019): The ill project manager might give the opportunity to a colleague they feel indebted to.

Reflecting the distinction between trust behavior and trust expectations, our initial studies revealed participants sometimes behaviorally trusted a target even when they expected the target would betray them. Following these unexpected initial results, we adopted a final goal: to test how class context influences trust behavior versus expectations and to better understand the role of expectations in any effects on behavior.

Overview

We conducted five preregistered studies (plus twelve preregistered replications reporting the same basic findings; see Supplemental Material), that together (a) test whether people preferentially trust targets from lower class contexts, (b) examine perceptions of morality as a mechanism, (c) explore whether effects differ for targets' current versus childhood class context, and (d) explore whether effects differ for trust behavior versus expectations. We also explored, but found almost no evidence for, class-based similarity effects.

Studies 1a and 1b

Participants played the trust game with multiple targets varying in social class, and completed exploratory measures of trust expectations. These studies were preregistered (https://osf.io/7m59n/ and https://osf.io/xmtp5/). Study 1a made no directional prediction; Study 1b predicted participants would trust targets from lower (vs. higher) class contexts more. Half the participants in Study 1b made hypothetical (rather than real) trust decisions. This manipulation had no effect, as reported below.

Method

Transparency and Openness

For all studies, we report all measures, manipulations and exclusions, and how we determined sample sizes. Analyses used base R (R Core Team, 2013) and the dplyr (Wickham et al., 2023), ggplot (Wickham, 2016), lavaan (Rosseel, 2012), lmerTest (Kuznetsova et al., 2017), psych (Revelle, 2017), and tidyr (Wickham et al., 2024) packages. All studies received ethics approval and were preregistered; exploratory measures and analyses are explicitly labeled. An Supplemental Material table discloses deviations from preregistered plans; none change significance levels or alter substantive conclusions. Data, code for analysis, study materials, and preregistrations are available at https://osf.io/kjnyh/.

Participants Study 1a

We collected data from 200 undergraduates in the lab, aiming for 80% power to detect a within-subjects effect of $d = .20$. We excluded 15 participants who, at the end of the study, failed an attention check about the obvious difference between the targets from higher and lower class contexts. This check asked them to indicate, while they still had targets' profiles in front of them, whether each target would fit the category "lower to middle class" or "middle to upper class." We also excluded seven participants who were suspicious that their partners in the trust game were not real. The final sample of 178 (see Table 1 for demographic details) could detect within-subjects effects of $d = .21$ or greater with 80% power at the conventional α of .05.

Participants Study 1b

Study 1b's analyses included data from 187 undergraduates (see Table 1 for demographic details) and could detect within-subjects effects of $d = .21$ or greater with 80% power and an α of .05. As in Study 1a, this final sample excludes participants who did not correctly perceive the difference between the higher and lower class context targets ($n = 54$) or suspected their partner were not real ($n = 8$). It also excludes participants who failed what turned out to be an unexpectedly potent attention check: carefully reading a block of text directing participants to ignore the question at the bottom of the screen and instead select "other" and type a phrase ($n = 163$ out of a preexclusion sample of 372; some exclusions were overlapping). To ensure our results are not contingent on the selection bias that this potent exclusion criterion could have induced, the Supplemental Material reports exploratory robustness checks showing that the results are the same when we do not exclude these participants.

Procedure Study 1a

Participants came into the lab for a study about how limited information affects impression formation and economic decision-

Table 1
Demographics for Participants in Each Study

Variable	Study				
	1a	1b	2	3	4
% indicating gender					
Woman	65	67	57	54	59
Man	34	33	38	43	40
Another gender	1	1	1	1	1
Age, *M* (*SD*)	20.3 (2.3)	20.5 (3.4)	37.2 (12.7)	35.5 (11.4)	35.1 (12.8)
% selecting ethnicity					
White	22	22	55	53	52
East Asian	48	53	14	12	7
South Asian	14	13			
Black	2	2	25	30	35
Another ethnicity	14	10	13	14	11
Class ladder, *M* (*SD*)	6.48 (1.32)	6.57 (1.15)	5.32 (1.73)	5.20 (1.63)	5.43 (1.74)
Range	3–10	3–9	1–10	1–10	1–10
% with (parental)[a] income in CAD					
<$50 K	22	21	35	36	47
>$50 K and <$100 K	38	38	29	28	34
>$100,000	39	42	35	36	19
% with (parental)[a] education					
No college degree	20	20	39	38	12
Two- or 4-year college degree	42	46	38	38	62
Postgraduate degree	38	34	23	24	26

Note. We included other ethnicity options and more fine-grained income and education options but present these coarser groupings for brevity. Participants could select multiple ethnicities and not all participants reported a gender, so percentages do not add up to 100. CAD = Canadian dollars.
[a] For Studies 1a and 1b, income and education are parental, as all participants were students.

making. They learned that they and four other participants—the targets—were partnered together for the study. We took steps to ensure participants believed these fictional targets were actually in the lab with them by, for example, having research assistants repeat instructions aloud in adjacent (but actually empty) cubicles.

Participants completed a paper-and-pencil profile that included two parts, and learned that for each person in their group zero, one, or both would be shared with other members. The targets' profiles contained our critical manipulation of class context (see below); participants filled out their own profile only to allay suspicion. After participants completed their profiles, the computer indicated that zero of their profile parts would be shared with the group; the experimenter noted this aloud upon entering the room, and redacted all participants' answers with a black marker before taking the profile to be photocopied. This ensured that participants' trust decisions would not be influenced by what they believed their partners knew about them.

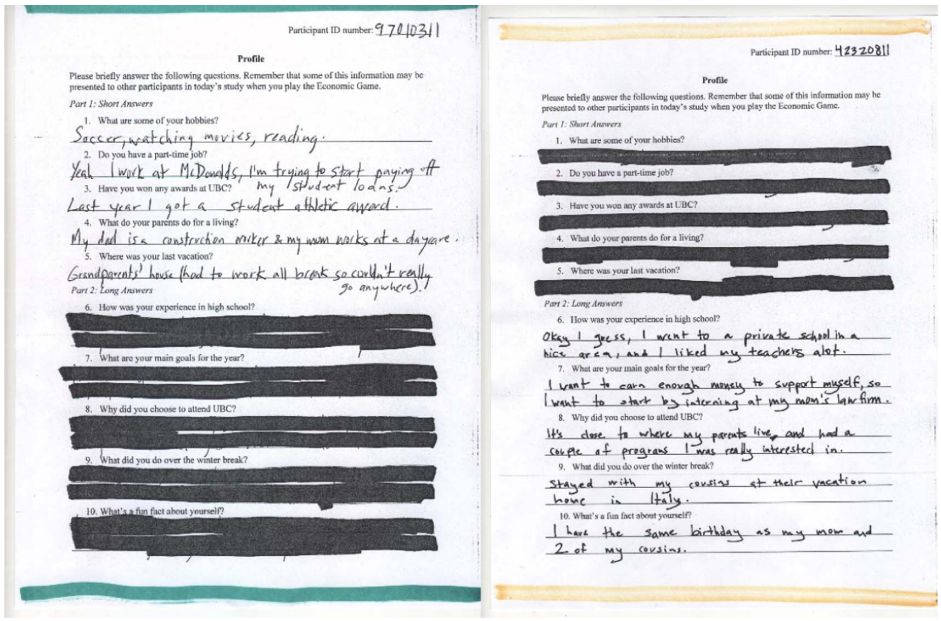
Target Class Context Manipulation. Before participants made their trust decisions, the experimenter provided them with four photocopied and color-coded handwritten profiles, redacted to varying degrees, each one supposedly completed by one of the other participants in the session. There was a completely redacted control profile, as well as a lower, a middle-, and a higher class context profile, see Figure 1 for an example and Table 2 for all details. The middle-class context profile was fully unredacted, and the lower and higher class context profiles had complementary redacted parts. Note that these profiles convey students' family circumstances, which participants could have taken to indicate purely their current standing, or to say something about their childhood context.

Trust Behavior. The experimenter explained the rules of the trust game (Berg et al., 1995), the most widely used behavioral measure of trust, cited nearly 8,000 times to date. To ensure participants understood, they had to correctly answer three comprehension questions before moving on. In our version of this game, one person (the truster, who we labeled for participants as "Person A") started with 10 raffle tickets to a draw for two $100 Amazon gift cards. The truster could transfer any number of those tickets to the other person (the trustee, labeled "Person B"). The transferred tickets would then be tripled, and the trustee could decide to return any number of those tickets back to the truster. We operationalized trust behavior as the number of tickets the truster transferred to a trustee. Like any form of trust behavior, trust game transfers do not necessarily represent trust expectations (e.g., Baumard & Sperber, 2010; Galizzi & Navarro-Martinez, 2019). Nonetheless, these transfers do correspond to the behavioral definition of trust: They entail accepting the possibility that the other player might selfishly keep all the profits for themselves, rather than returning a fair proportion of the now-expanded pot of money (see also Brülhart & Usunier, 2012; Smith, 2003). Naïve participants believe that this game involves trust (Dunning et al., 2012), and decisions in the trust game are correlated with self-reports of everyday acts of trust such as leaving doors unlocked or loaning money to friends (Fehr et al., 2002; Glaeser et al., 2000).

Participants learned they would play the trust game with each of their partners. They learned further that they had been randomly selected to be "Person A" (the truster) for the control, higher class context, and lower class context targets' profiles, but "Person B" (the trustee) for the middle-class context target. Thus, participants made no trust decision with respect to the middle-class context

Figure 1

Example of One Combination of Lower and Higher Class Context Profiles Participants Viewed



Note. UBC = University of British Columbia. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

target. We included this target only because we worried participants would be suspicious if they were assigned to be "Person A" for all their games. Participants made no decisions as trustee, because the experiment ended before they could play their assigned "Person B" role.

For each of their "Person A" roles, participants received a packet, color-coded to match the relevant profile, containing 10 raffle tickets and two envelopes labeled "tickets to keep" and "tickets to give to Person B." The experimenter left the room while the participant placed their tickets into the envelopes according to their trust decisions.

Trust Expectations. We operationalized trust expectations in direct connection to the trust game. We did not ask how many tickets participants expected the partner to return, because this question would not be answerable by participants who did not transfer any of their own tickets. Instead, we asked all participants this question: "If you had given all 10 tickets to this person, they would then have 30 tickets. How many do you think they would have given back to you?" Participants could indicate any number between 0 and 30. We preregistered this measure as exploratory and included it only in reference to the higher and lower class context targets. Moreover, in retrospect we recognized that it had an important limitation: It assumes that expecting more tickets in return reflects greater expectations of trustworthiness, but that might only be true to a point. A participant who expects the target to return *all 30* tickets, for example, might be expecting the target to be not only trustworthy, but also selfless, or perhaps inattentive.

Questions About Targets' Characteristics. At the end of the survey participants guessed how the lower and higher class context targets had answered various demographic questions: their gender, age, ethnicity, and position on the class ladder measure described below. The last of these served as a manipulation check. In this study as in Studies 1b and 2, participants answered additional exploratory questions, not related to the present theorizing, about these two targets (see posted materials for details).

Participant Class Context. To measure participants' objective class context, we took the highest level of education achieved by either parent (using a 6-point scale: 1 = *less than high school*; 2 = *high school graduate*; 3 = *some college/university;* 4 = *2-year degree* [e.g., college degree]; 5 = *4-year degree* [e.g., Bachelor's degree]; 6 = *professional or graduate degree* [e.g., PhD, MD]), standardized this, and summed it with standardized parental income (measured on an 8-point scale: 1 = *below $15,000*; 2 = *$15,001–$25,000*; 3 = *$25,001–$35,000*; 4 = *$35,001–$50,000*; 5 = *$50,001–$75,000*; 6 = *$75,001–$100,000*; 7 = *$100,001–$150,000*; 8 = *$150,001 or more*). These indices were weakly correlated ($r = .19$, $p = .012$), but we nevertheless report analyses using this composite measure as preregistered; results do not differ if we examine income and education individually. To measure participants' subjective class context, we had them indicate where they would fall on a ladder with 10 rungs if the bottom rung represents people who have the least money, least education, and worst or no jobs, and the top rung represents people who have the most money, most education, and best jobs (e.g., Adler & Ostrove, 1999; Adler et al., 2000).

Procedure Study 1b

Study 1b took place online, but otherwise used a very similar procedure to Study 1a.

Target Class Context Manipulation. Based on the results of Study 1a, we omitted the control target. Participants therefore had three rather than four partners. Two of these partners were the higher

Table 2
Profiles Used to Manipulate Target Social Class, Study 1a

Question	Control response	Lower-class context	Higher-class context	Middle-class context (filler target)
		Profile Part 1		
What are some of your hobbies?	(always redacted)	**Soccer, watching movies, reading.**	*Soccer, watching movies, reading.*	Cooking, hiking, basketball.
Do you have a part-time job?	(always redacted)	**Yeah I work at McDonalds, I'm trying to start paying off my student loans.**	*No, my parents are paying my tuition, I'm trying to focus on school.*	Not right now.
Have you won any awards at [university]?	(always redacted)	**Last year I got a student athletic award.**	*Last year I got a student athletic award.*	Nope.
What do your parents do for a living?	(always redacted)	**My dad is a construction worker & my mom works at a daycare.**	*My dad is a software engineer & my mom is a corporate lawyer.*	My dad is an accountant and my mom is a nurse.
Where was your last vacation?	(always redacted)	**Grandparents' house (had to work all break so couldn't really go anywhere).**	*Grandparents' vacation home in Italy.*	Camping with a couple friends.
		Profile Part 2		
How was your experience in high school?	(always redacted)	*Okay I guess, I went to a public school in kind of a sketchy area, but I liked my teachers a lot.*	**Okay I guess, I went to a private school in a nice area, and I liked my teachers a lot.**	Pretty good, I'm still close with a few of my friends from high school.
What are your main goals for the year?	(always redacted)	*I want to earn enough money to support myself and maybe start paying off my student loans.*	**I want to earn enough money to support myself, so I want to start by interning at my mom's law firm.**	Get good grades in all my classes, start going to the gym more and eating healthy.
Why did you choose to attend [university]?	(always redacted)	*It's close to where my parents live and had a couple of programs I was really interested in.*	**It's close to where my parents live and had a couple of programs I was really interested in.**	I really like the campus, and [city] in general.
What did you do over the winter break?	(always redacted)	*Stayed with my cousins (had to work during the break so couldn't really go anywhere).*	**Stayed with my cousins at their vacation home in Italy.**	Went home to visit my family.
What's a fun fact about yourself?	(always redacted)	*I have the same birthday as my mom and 2 of my cousins!*	**I have the same birthday as my mom and 2 of my cousins!**	I got my appendix taken out when I was 12 years old.

Note. Participants saw either the italicized responses with the bolded responses redacted or vice versa. Black responses contain the class context signals; neutral responses appear in gray.

and lower social class context targets from Studies 1a and like in Study 1a, participants would eventually play the role of truster with these partners.

Participants' third partner was a filler target, with whom they would be assigned the role of trustee. Rather than have the filler target be represented by a middle-class context profile, each participant had a brief online chat with a real other participant; participants paired in this way served as each other's filler targets, about whom they ultimately made no decisions. This served to further convince participants that their partners were real.

Trust Behavior. Participants played the trust game as in Study 1a, allocating tickets using a dropdown menu. We also included another behavioral trust measure, preregistered as secondary: a prisoner's dilemma (Axelrod, 1984). Participants learned that if they and a partner both cooperated with each other, each would receive six tickets to the same raffle as in the trust game. They also learned that if both defected, each would receive only two tickets, and that if their decisions did not match, the defector would receive 10 tickets and the cooperator 0. Note that although mutual cooperation yields the best combined outcome, defecting is always the more

individually profitable response. Cooperation in this game is therefore a trusting behavior (Chaudhuri et al., 2002; Deutsch, 1958): A cooperator is accepting vulnerability in the face of a partner who could act out of pure self-interest and choose to defect. At the same time, cooperating also requires *being* trustworthy, making it a less pure measure of trust behavior. Prisoner's dilemma cooperation correlated with trust game transfers at $r = .41$, $p < .001$, suggesting they indeed represent related but not identical constructs.

We counterbalanced the order in which participants played the two games, but did not want them to worry that their behavior in the first game would influence their partners' behavior in the second game. We therefore described the procedure in a way that left no room for such influence. For example, if participants played the trust game first, we told them Player As (the trusters) would all make *private* decisions, and then all players would make *private* prisoner's dilemma decisions, before Player Bs found out how many tickets their Player As had transferred. In reality, the experiment ended before the Player Bs was to make their decisions.

Trust Expectations. As in Study 1a, participants reported expectations about how many tickets their partners would return, if they had transferred all 10 they started with. They also indicated whether they thought their partner would cooperate or defect. At the time of this study, we regarded measures of trust expectations as peripheral, because we were focused on trust behavior; they therefore do not appear in the preregistration, only the posted materials.

Questions About Targets' Characteristics. Participants guessed the targets' ethnicity, extroversion, and position on the class ladder measure described above.

Additional Manipulation: Real Versus Hypothetical Stakes. Study 1b included a condition where the stakes were hypothetical rather than real, asking participants to make only imaginary decisions about imaginary targets. Participants in this hypothetical stakes condition imagined chatting with another participant (the filler target) rather than actually doing so. To avoid self-selection biases, participants in both conditions signed up to complete the study at a specific time and could only proceed if another participant had signed up for their same timeslot.

Results

Because these Studies 1a and 1b followed identical analysis plans, we report their results together.

Manipulation Checks

Participants placed the targets from higher and lower class contexts on different rungs of the class ladder, indicating our manipulation was successful (see Table 3, social class rows). They also, however, perceived these targets differently in other ways (see Table 3, other rows). For example, participants perceived the higher class context targets as more likely to be men, more likely to be White, and more extroverted. Though these unintended effects were in keeping with how social class typically correlates with gender, race, and personality (e.g., Graf et al., 2021; Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018; Laurin et al., 2024), they nonetheless confounded our manipulation. The Supplemental Material therefore reports exploratory robustness checks that control for these demographic perceptions and replicate the findings reported below.

Trust

Table 4 reports the correlations between trust behavior and trust expectations, separately for higher and lower class context targets. Trust behavior was correlated with trust expectations but only moderately. This is consistent with the idea that trust behavior and expectations are related, and with the idea that people sometimes behaviorally trust others even if they do not expect others to honor that trust. Indeed, some participants transferred tickets (in rare cases even all 10) even when they expected targets to return none (see data posted on Open Science Framework are available at https://osf.io/kjnyh/).

Trust Game. For each study, we ran three multilevel regression models to examine trust game behavior, see Table 5 and Figure 2. Model 1 predicted trust (number of tickets transferred) from target class context (dummy-coded with lower class context as the reference), controlling for which version of the manipulation participants saw (effect coded as 1 = profile part 1 for the target from a lower class context and profile part 2 for the target from a higher class context, −1 = the reverse) and random intercepts for participants. Model 2 added participant subjective class context and its interaction terms; Model 3 added participant objective class context and its interaction terms.

Participants transferred more tickets to target from a lower class context than to the target from a higher class context ($d_{1a} = .27$; $d_{1b} = .22$). Regarding Study 1a's control target (Study 1b did

Table 3
Participants' Guesses of Targets' Demographics, Studies 1a/1b

Demographic variable	Study	Target class context		Difference between target
		Low	High	
Social class: *M* (*SD*)	1a	4.64 (1.31)	8.03 (1.01)	$t(177) = 29.76$, $p < .001$
	1b	4.82 (1.11)	8.17 (1.00)	$t(186) = 33.60$, $p < .001$
Race: % White	1a	69	83	McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 9.19$, $p = .002$
	1b	59	85	McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 22.27$, $p < .001$
Race: % Asian	1a	25	15	McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 5.49$, $p = .019$
	1b	26	14	McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 5.97$, $p = .015$
Gender: % man	1a	53	82	McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 30.24$, $p < .001$
Age: *M* (*SD*)	1a	20.13 (1.17)	19.88 (1.07)	$t(176) = 2.80$, $p = .006$
Extroversion (*SD*)	1b	4.57 (1.20)	5.16 (1.14)	$t(186) = 4.67$, $p < .001$

Note. Race categories besides White and Asian were selected too infrequently to analyze.

Table 4
Correlations Between Trust Behavior and Trust Expectations, Study 1b; Values for Targets From Higher (Lower) Class Contexts Are Above (Below) the Diagonal

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Game behavior	—	.38	.43	.38
2. Game expectations	.34	—	.31	.52
3. Dilemma behavior	.37	.39	—	.51
4. Dilemma expectations	.31	.60	.47	—

Note. For Study 1a, we only measured game behavior and expectations; $r_{\text{higher class target}} = .37$ and $r_{\text{lower class target}} = .27$. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

not feature one), participants transferred them fewer tickets than they did to the one from a lower class context ($d = .36$), but did not distinguish between the control target and the one from a higher class context ($b = .14$, $SE = .18$, $p = .429$, $d = .07$). There were no effects of or interactions with participants' own class context.

Prisoner's Dilemma (Study 1b only). We examined prisoner's dilemma behavior (1 = cooperate, 0 = defect) using the same models as logistic rather than linear regressions, see Table 6.

Participants were more likely to cooperate with the target from a lower class context (68% cooperation) compared to the target from a higher class context (59% cooperation). There were again no effects of or interactions with participants' class context.

Experimental Realism Manipulation (Study 1b Only). To the models above, we added terms for the experimental realism variable (1 = real, −1 = hypothetical) and its interactions with target social class, see Table 7. None of these terms reached significance.

Exploratory Analyses: Trust Expectations

Table 8 shows that the pattern was much weaker when considering our exploratory measure of trust expectations (included only for targets from higher and lower class contexts). In Study 1a, target class context had no effect; in Study 1b, participants had marginally greater trust expectations for targets from lower compared to higher class contexts. Contrasting this pattern with the significant and consistent effects on actual behavior in the trust game and prisoner's dilemma further highlights that trust behavior may not always arise from trust expectations.

Discussion

Participants behaved more trustingly toward targets from lower (vs. higher) class contexts: They transferred them more tickets in a trust game and cooperated with them more in a prisoner's dilemma game. These studies manipulated class context using casual statements that people might realistically share in conversation. The low suspicion rate (3.5%) indicated that participants found this manipulation believable, though the effects did not depend on experimental realism.

These studies' naturalistic manipulation may have conveyed confounds beyond the demographic characteristics we measured (e.g., anxiety, pretentiousness), and students from lower class contexts may be a particular case in that they may seem on the cusp of upward mobility. In light of these limitations, Table 9 summarizes, and the Supplemental Material reports in detail, 12 preregistered supplemental studies replicating the basic finding. Some of these studies asked additional substantive questions (e.g., about alternative mechanisms, or the difference between the stable rich and the upwardly mobile—this ultimately led us to decouple childhood and current class contexts entirely), but many aimed primarily to generalize to other populations

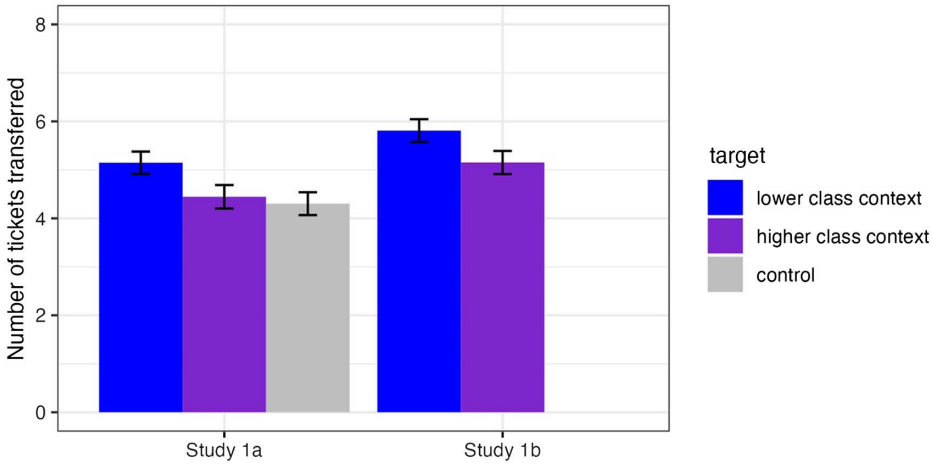
Table 5
Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Trust Game Behavior, Studies 1a and 1b

	Study 1a				Study 1b			
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Model 1								
Intercept (lower class target)	5.16	0.24	21.93	<.001	5.80	0.24	24.12	<.001
Profile combination condition	0.38	0.21	1.77	.079	−0.12	0.21	−0.57	.568
Higher class context target	**−0.70**	**0.18**	**−3.96**	**<.001**	**−0.65**	**0.22**	**3.00**	**.003**
Control target	−0.84	0.18	−4.75	<.001				
Model 2								
Intercept (lower class target)	5.16	0.24	21.87	<.001	5.80	0.24	24.11	<.001
Profile combination condition	0.38	0.21	1.77	.079	−0.12	0.21	0.57	.568
Higher class target	**−0.70**	**0.18**	**3.95**	**<.001**	**−0.65**	**0.22**	**2.99**	**.003**
Control target	−0.84	0.18	4.74	<.001				
(Participant) subjective class	−0.09	0.18	0.52	.602	0.23	0.21	1.09	.278
Higher Class × Subjective Class	0.06	0.13	0.47	.638	−0.05	0.19	0.27	.788
Control Target × Subjective Class	0.10	0.13	0.71	.478				
Model 3								
Intercept (lower class target)	5.19	0.24	22.00	<.001	5.80	0.24	24.17	<.001
Profile combination condition	0.35	0.21	1.67	.097	−0.13	0.21	0.62	.535
Higher class target	**−0.71**	**0.18**	**3.95**	**<.001**	**−0.65**	**0.22**	**3.00**	**.003**
Control target	−0.85	0.18	4.75	<.001				
(Participant) objective class	−0.10	0.16	0.63	.529	0.15	0.15	1.01	.312
Higher Class × Objective Class	−0.04	0.12	0.36	.722	0.09	0.14	0.69	.489
Control Target × Objective Class	0.04	0.12	0.37	.709				

Note. Rows containing the key hypothesis test are bolded. Study 1b had no control target. *SE* = standard error.

Figure 2

Trust Behavior, or Number of Raffle Tickets That Participants Transferred, Toward Targets From Different Class Contexts; Studies 1a–1b



Note. Error bars represent standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

and manipulations: They recruited samples of U.S. and U.K. adults, manipulated class context using various objective indicators like income or education, and generally did not involve targets who were students. Most of these studies employed the trust game, and together, their findings help solidify the key finding that people do, at least in this situation, behave more trustingly toward targets from lower class contexts.

Despite the robustness of the basic trust behavior finding, two theoretical questions remain outstanding. First, are effects driven by current, childhood, or both social class contexts? In many studies, targets were young adults whose current class contexts might primarily reflect their families' and speak to the resources they grew up with. Indeed, depending on assumptions about the intergenerational transmission of status, our manipulations of class context could have influenced perceptions of targets' current standing, childhood standing, or both. Second, how do expectations relate to trust behavior? Exploratory analyses found participants did not necessarily hold greater trust *expectations* toward people from lower class contexts. It is possible this was a methodological artifact of the shortcoming of our trust expectations measure. But it also raises a substantive alternative possibility: that participants' trusting behavior—which entailed transferring economic resources—may have been motivated by other factors.

To resolve these ambiguities, our remaining studies manipulated the two class contexts independently and more directly examined the role of trust expectations (and, in Study 4, other potential motivators). They also measured perceived morality.

Study 2

Study 2 (preregistered at https://osf.io/45u7q/) separately manipulated childhood and current class context between participants. Participants played a trust game with their assigned target, completed a validated measure of individual trust expectations that covers a diverse range of real-world contexts, and reported perceptions of morality.

We preregistered predictions that both lower class contexts (current and childhood) would increase both forms of trust (behavior and expectations) mediated by perceived morality. Our predictions were the same for both class contexts and for both forms of trust as this was the first study where we gave all these variables distinct operationalizations and equal emphasis. We also planned to explore the interactions between the two class contexts.

For completeness, the Supplemental Material reports exploratory analyses for Studies 2–4 returning no significant effects of participant class.

Table 6

Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Prisoner's Dilemma Behavior, Study 1b

	Model 1: No participant class				Model 2: Participant subjective class				Model 3: Participant objective class			
Coefficient	*logOR*	*SE*	*z*	*p*	*logOR*	*SE*	*z*	*p*	*logOR*	*SE*	*z*	*p*
Intercept (lower class target)	1.21	0.26	4.51	<.001	1.21	0.26	4.60	<.001	1.21	0.26	4.61	<.001
Profile combination	0.05	0.18	0.26	.793	0.05	0.18	0.29	.774	0.04	0.18	0.24	.810
Higher class target	**−0.59**	**0.27**	**2.17**	**.030**	**−0.59**	**0.27**	**2.15**	**.032**	**−0.59**	**0.27**	**2.16**	**.031**
Participant class					0.31	0.20	1.58	.115	0.03	0.14	0.21	.836
Target × Pclass					0.16	0.24	0.68	.499	0.07	0.17	0.41	.612

Note. Rows containing the key hypothesis test are bolded. *OR* = odds ratio; *SE* = standard error.

Table 7
Null Effects of Study 1b's Experimental Realism Manipulation on Participants' Trust Behavior

		Model 1: No participant class				Model 2: Participant subjective class				Model 3: Participant objective class			
Coefficient	DV	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Main effect	Game	−0.17	0.25	0.71	.479	−0.18	0.25	0.74	.463	−0.18	0.25	0.74	.459
	Dilemma	0.21	0.23	0.93	.354	0.19	0.23	0.81	.418	0.21	0.23	0.93	.355
Interaction with class	Game	0.36	0.22	1.63	.104	0.36	0.22	1.63	.105	0.35	0.22	1.60	.111
	Dilemma	0.12	0.27	0.46	.649	0.11	0.27	0.42	.677	0.12	0.27	0.65	.586

Note. For dilemma rows, the *b* column contains *logOR*, and the *t* column contains a *z* statistic. *OR* = odds ratio; *SE* = standard error; DV = dependent variable.

Method

Participants

We collected data from 600 U.S. participants recruited through Prolific. We excluded 45 participants who failed an attention check about the rules of the trust game (a multiple-choice question about how much the trustee would receive if the truster transferred a particular amount). The final sample of $N = 555$ (see Table 1 for demographics) could detect between-subjects effects of $d = .24$ or greater with 80% power at the conventional α of .05.

Procedure

Target Class Context Manipulations. Participants read about one person, described in a 2 (Current Class Context) × 2 (Childhood Class Context) between-participants design. For generalizability, we manipulated target gender via the person's name (John or Jane), but did not plan to analyze this variable. In the high (low) current class context conditions, they first read that:

> After high school, [John/Jane] attended a prestigious university (did not attend university) and now works as a [job]. [John/Jane] receives a high (low) salary for [his/her] work.

We wanted this manipulation to cover all three elements of social class, including occupational prestige, but were wary of the stereotypes that might be associated with specific occupations. We therefore consulted a recent index (Hughes et al., 2024) to select four relatively common and high-ranked jobs (architect, civil engineer, dentist, lawyer) and four relatively common and low-ranked jobs (cashier, dishwasher, janitor, parking lot attendant). For each participant, we randomly assigned the target a job that matched their class context condition.

Next, participants in the high-(low)-childhood-class context conditions read that:

> This is [much like/unlike] [his/her] parents, who were very well-educated (had little education) and had high-(low-)ranking jobs with high. (low) salaries when [he/she] was growing up.

A manipulation check asked participants to place the target on two separate class ladders, first representing their status when growing up, and second representing their current status in adult life. We did not measure any other perceptions of the target.

Trust Measures. Next, participants completed two measures in counterbalanced order. One of these measures was the trust game. Participants imagined coming into the lab to play a trust game with the target with a starting endowment of $10. They reported how much they would transfer to the target in $1 increments.

The other measure assessed trust expectations. Rather than tie those expectations to the trust game, like in Studies 1a and 1b, we used a broader measure validated in prior research. Participants imagined that the target was someone they knew, and completed the nine items from the overall trust subscale of the specific interpersonal trust measure (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982) on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Unlike the trust game, this scale's items all implicate trust expectations. For example, one item asks "If [target] gave me a compliment I would question if [target] really meant what they said"; this item asks whether participants expect the target to speak honestly or flatter them for ulterior motives. Another reads "I wouldn't want to buy a piece of used furniture from [target] because I wouldn't believe their estimate of its worth" [reverse-scored]; this item touches on trust behavior, but explicitly asks participants to consider whether they expect the target to be fair or lie for personal benefit. We computed a trust expectations score by averaging across all items (α = .78)

Table 8
Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Trust Expectations, Studies 1a and 1b

	Trust game expectation (1a)				Trust game expectation (1b)				Dilemma expectation (1b)			
Coefficient	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*logOR*	*SE*	*z*	*p*
Intercept (lower class target)	8.53	0.48	17.8	<.001	11.4	0.39	29.1	<.001	0.82	0.16	5.16	<.001
Profile combination	0.03	0.42	0.08	.939	−0.47	0.31	1.53	.129	0.12	0.11	1.07	.284
Higher class target	**−0.01**	**0.42**	**0.02**	**.983**	**−0.82**	**0.49**	**1.67**	**.097**	**−0.38**	**0.22**	**1.74**	**.082**

Note. Rows containing the key hypothesis test are bolded. These exploratory models do not include participant class; Supplemental Material contains models including it and finding it has no effects. *OR* = odds ratio; *SE* = standard error.

Table 9
Summary of Additional Preregistered Studies

Study	Link to preregistration	Class context manipulation	Trust game transfers to others from high- versus low-class context
SS1	https://osf.io/yp6jm/	As in Studies 1a–1b	$b = -0.50$, $t(171) = 3.49$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.27$
SS2	https://osf.io/bwqjy/	Family income or class ladder of imaginary young adults	$b = -2.36$, $t(255) = 1.49$, $p = .137$, $d = 0.13$
SS3	https://osf.io/u9me6/	Class ladder of imaginary young adults	$b = -3.08$, $t(315) = 1.78$, $p = .076$, $d = 0.14$
SS4	https://osf.io/p5zjr/	Family income of imaginary young adults	$b = -4.52$, $t(1092) = 8.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$
SS5	https://osf.io/ajgbe/	As in Study SS4	$b = -0.13$, $t(1156) = 12.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.43$
SS6	https://aspredicted.org/ymm6-c67m.pdf	Childhood context of real coworker	$t(199) = 4.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.61$
SS7	https://aspredicted.org/355w-8jvp.pdf	Childhood context of real coworker	$t(198) = 4.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$
SS8	https://aspredicted.org/tnkm-zyh5.pdf	Childhood context of real coworker	$t(199) = 3.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$
SS9	https://aspredicted.org/2hm5-cbjf.pdf	Parental education and income of imaginary adult (i.e., childhood context)	$t(289) = 2.21$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.26$
SS10	https://aspredicted.org/fqjn-fdzk.pdf	Parental education and income of imaginary adult (i.e., childhood context)	$t(522) = 2.00$, $p = .046$, $d = 0.17$
SS11	https://aspredicted.org/7tsk-2xqx.pdf	Parental education and income of imaginary adult (i.e., childhood context)	$t(673) = 3.57$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.27$
SS12	https://aspredicted.org/s2hc-pdj5.pdf	Parental and current own education and income of imaginary adult	Child: $t(392) = 3.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.34$ Current: $t(392) = 3.29$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.33$

Note. In SS1, the resource at stake was time: Participants started with 10 credits, each of which entitled them to leave the study 1 min early. SS2 and SS3 were conducted on Mechanical Turk in the summer of 2018, when data quality was notably low. Indeed, 36% (S3) and 22% (S2) of participants had to be excluded by our preregistered criteria, leaving us with samples smaller than we anticipated. Combining them for increased power yielded a significant effect, $b = -2.59$, $t(575) = 2.18$, $p = .030$, $d = 0.13$. SS1 through SS5 were within subjects; analyses were multilevel regression models. SS6 through SS12 were between subjects; analyses were between-subjects t tests. In Studies SS6 through SS11 targets, *current* class context was always high. SS = supplemental study.

Mediator, Comprehension Check, and Demographics. In line with the theoretical basis for our primary hypothesis, participants reported on the target's morality (drawn from Brambilla et al., 2013; Landy et al., 2016): They used a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely to rate* "How MORAL is this person?"; "How PRINCIPLED is this person?"; "How HONEST is this person?"; "How SINCERE is this person?"; "How ETHICAL is this person?"; "Are they a GOOD PERSON?" ($\alpha = .92$).

At the end of the study, after participants completed the trust game attention check, they reported their demographics, including two versions of the ladder measure (one for their current life and one for their childhood), their personal income, and their level of education.

Results

Manipulation Check

We ran linear models with both the current and childhood class context manipulations as interactive predictors (high = 1; low = −1) to see whether they influenced participants' perceptions as intended. Participants saw the target as having had higher class as a child when they read about their higher versus lower class childhood contexts ($M = 7.39$, $SD = 1.52$ vs. $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.33$), $b = 2.11$, $t(551) = 35.50$, $p < .001$. Likewise, participants saw the target as having higher class currently when they read about their current income, education, and occupational prestige ($M = 7.90$, $SD = 1.11$ vs. $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.47$), $b = 2.26$, $t(551) = 41.08$, $p < .001$. Thus, our manipulations were successful and similarly strong.

That said, both manipulations had much smaller but still significant unintended effects: Participants saw the target as having had higher class as a *child* when they read about their *current* higher class context ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 2.52$ vs. $M = 5.01$, $SD = 2.55$), $b = 0.28$, $t(551) = 4.63$, $p < .001$; likewise, they saw the target as having higher class *now* when they read about their *childhood* higher class context ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.64$ vs. $M = 5.48$, $SD = 2.58$), $b = 0.18$, $t(551) = 3.24$, $p = .001$. These effects may reflect people's assumptions about the intergenerational transmission of status and underscore the importance of manipulating both variables separately: If the manipulation of childhood class context, for example, has a small effect through its effects on perceived current class context, the presumably large effect of the direct manipulation of current class context would help us interpret it correctly.

Neither interaction was significant, bs < 0.03, ps $> .625$.

Trust

Table 10 reports the correlations between behavioral trust game behavior, trust expectations, and perceived morality, separately for each type of target. Trust expectations and perceived morality were highly correlated with each other and less strongly correlated with trust game behavior. Together with the moderate correlations between behavior and expectations from Studies 1a and 1b, this further suggests that people do not always base their trust decisions on their expectations that the trustee will honor rather than exploit them.

We used the same models described in the manipulation check section to predict trust game behavior and trust expectations, see Table 11 and Figure 3. After examining the results for trust expectations, and noticing that the three reverse-scored items in this

Table 10
Correlations Between Measures for Each Combination of Current and Childhood Target Class Context, Study 2

Target condition	Behavior and expectation	Behavior and morality	Expectations and morality
Low childhood, low current	.24	.24	.66
Low childhood, high current	.26	.33	.67
High childhood, low current	.27	.24	.77
High childhood, high current	.18	.15	.70

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

scale reduced its reliability, we computed a second, exploratory score that discarded these items ($\alpha = .85$).

Trust Game Behavior. Replicating previous studies, and significantly for both manipulations of class context, participants transferred more money to the target from a lower compared higher class context ($d_{childhood} = 0.26$—darker vs. paler bars; $d_{current} = 0.38$—blue vs. purple bars). The interaction was not significant. In other words, both targets' current *and* childhood class context (but not their upward or downward mobility) influence people's behavioral trust in the same direction. For this and all subsequent analyses, we found no interactions; people did not for example, tend to trust specifically the upwardly mobile.

Trust Expectations. The effects on trust expectations were in the reverse direction. They were small—only one attained even marginal significance using the full scale. However, the pattern was clearer on the more reliable exploratory scale: Participants perceived targets from lower (vs. higher) *childhood* class contexts as *more* likely to honor trust ($d = 0.19$; darker vs. paler bars), but targets from lower (vs. higher) *current* contexts as *less* likely to honor trust ($d = -0.22$; blue vs. purple bars). This finding should be interpreted cautiously as it was not preregistered. Even so, it makes clear that trust behavior and trust expectations respond differently to targets' current class context. This further illustrates how behavioral trust can be divorced from expectations of the trustee's behavior, and that the distinction between current versus childhood social class matters.

Mediation by Morality

We estimated the indirect effects of each class context manipulation (effect coded as above) on trust game behavior and trust expectations, via perceived morality (see Table 12).

The *b* link column in Table 12 shows that, in all cases, participants were more likely to trust targets whom they perceived as more moral (controlling for the class context manipulation). The *a* link column shows that participants saw targets from lower childhood class contexts as more moral than targets from higher childhood class contexts, but that they saw no difference in morality based on targets' current class context. Accordingly, the indirect effect column shows that the key psychological pathway we posited—class-based stereotypes of morality—applies only to childhood class context. Perceptions of morality do not explain why people transfer more money in the trust game to targets from lower *current* class contexts.

Discussion

Study 2 found that it is those who *grew up* in lower class contexts, regardless of where they stand now, whom people stereotype as moral, expect to be trustworthy (exploratory analyses only), and behaviorally trust. People do accept positions of vulnerability with respect to those who *currently* find themselves in lower class contexts—that is, they (behaviorally) trust them—but this does not seem to be because they expect them to honor that trust. In fact, participants perceived targets currently in lower (vs. higher) class contexts as *less* likely to honor trust (exploratory analyses only) and as no more moral.

The effects on trust behavior were consistent with Studies 1a/1b. The mixed effects on morality and trust expectations were intriguing but not anticipated, and therefore in need of replication. Moreover, Study 2's current class manipulation had a potential confound in that it included specific jobs which could have biased our findings (though see Supplemental Material for exploratory robustness checks revealing similar patterns for individual jobs within higher and lower status categories). Study 3 used a cleaner manipulation to replicate Study 2's findings.

Study 3

Participants in Study 3 (preregistered at https://osf.io/645he/) reported on two different targets from the same 2 × 2 matrix as Study 2, using the same dependent measures and mediator. We

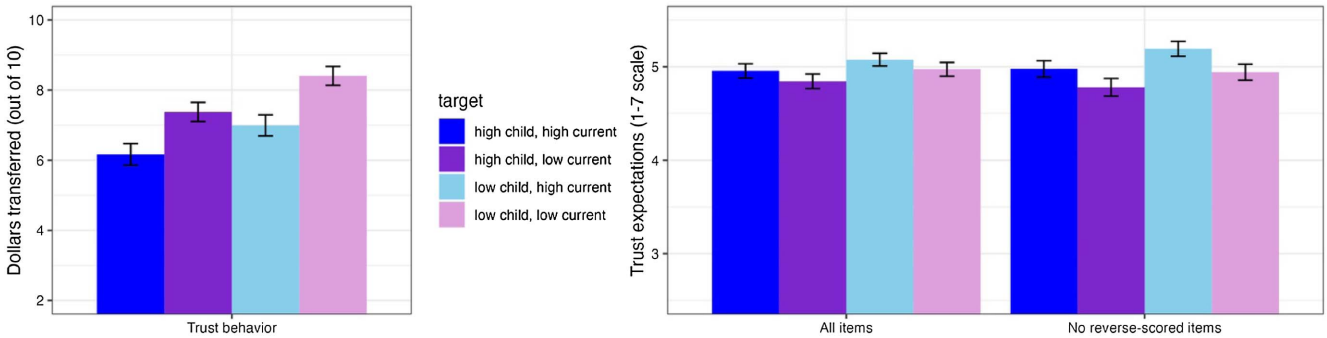
Table 11
Regression Analyses Predicting Trust Game Behavior and Trust Expectations Scale, Study 2

	Trust game behavior				Trust expectation				Trust expectation *exploratory* (no reverse-scored item)			
Coefficient	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*P*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Intercept	7.24	0.14	50.31	<.001	4.96	0.04	134.37	<.001	4.97	0.04	114.16	<.001
Current class	**−0.66**	**0.14**	**4.56**	**<.001**	**0.05**	**0.04**	**1.45**	**.147**	**0.11**	**0.04**	**2.56**	**.011**
Childhood class	**−0.46**	**0.14**	**3.23**	**.001**	**−0.06**	**0.04**	**1.69**	**.092**	**−0.09**	**0.04**	**2.16**	**.030**
Interaction	0.05	0.14	0.35	.723	0.002	0.04	0.05	.960	−0.01	0.04	0.31	.758

Note. Rows containing the key hypothesis test are bolded. *SE* = standard error.

Figure 3

Trust Behavior and Trust Expectations Toward Targets From Different Class Contexts, Study 2



Note. Error bars represent standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

preregistered the same predictions as for Study 2. Participants were randomly assigned either to imagine hypothetical targets or to nominate real people they knew; we made no predictions for this manipulation, and the Supplemental Material reports preregistered analyses finding it did not moderate any key effects.

Method

Participants

We collected data from 401 U.S. participants recruited through Prolific. We excluded 59 who failed a comprehension check about the rules of the trust game. The final sample of $N = 342$ (see Table 1 for demographics) could detect within-subjects effects of $d = .15$ or greater (and between-subjects effects of $d = .30$ or greater) with 80% power at the conventional α of .05.

Procedure

We assigned participants to either picture two acquaintances or two imaginary targets, each fitting into a different cell of the 2 (Childhood Class Context) × 2 (Current Class Context) matrix. Participants in the acquaintance condition provided the actual name (or pseudonym) of real targets, which we then piped back to them. Participants in the imaginary condition read about two targets with gender neutral names (Cameron, Morgan, Sam, and Alex). For all participants, the first target's name or pseudonym always appeared in blue, and the second's in orange, to help keep them distinct.

An example prompt for the first imaginary target read:

> To start with, we'd like you to think about **[target name]**. **[target name]** comes from a **high socioeconomic status in their youth** and is also of a **high socio-economic status in the present** [emphasis added]. In other words, **[target name]**'s childhood was spent in a high socioeconomic environment and **[target name]** is also currently in a high socioeconomic environment. Please take a few moments to think about what **[target name]** is like.

The acquaintance target prompt used the exact same language to describe class contexts, and all descriptions used the exact same language for current and childhood contexts, with no specific jobs mentioned. To reinforce the manipulation, participants briefly described the target's living situation now and growing up.

After picturing their first target, participants completed the same dependent measures (trust game, trust expectations) and mediator (perceived morality; $\alpha_{target1} = .96$, $\alpha_{target2} = .96$) as in Study 2, with respect to this target. For consistency with Study 2, we computed trust expectations scores across all items ($\alpha_{target1} = .84$, $\alpha_{target2} = .83$) and also omitting the reverse-scored items ($\alpha_{target1} = .91$, $\alpha_{target2} = .93$), noting that the latter again increased the scale's reliability.

Participants also reported on (acquaintance condition) or made guesses about (imaginary condition) the target's demographics, including a manipulation check: They made a binary choice to indicate whether the target was *currently* better off or worse off than the average person when it came to income, education, and the kind of job they had, and made the same binary choice with respect to their parents during childhood.

Participants then completed the same procedure again for a second target, followed by the same trust game comprehension check from Study 2. At the end of the survey, they reported their own demographics, as in Study 2.

Table 12

Mediation Models Predicting Trust From Class Context Through Perceived Morality, Study 2

Class context manipulation	Trust measure	*a* link (class → morality)	*b* link (morality → trust)	Indirect effect
Current	Behavior	$b = 0.05$, $p = .342$	$b = 0.75$, $p < .001$	[−0.04, 0.11]
	Expectations	$b = 0.05$, $p = .350$	$b = 0.53$, $p < .001$	[−0.03, 0.08]
	Expectations (exploratory)	$b = 0.05$, $p = .349$	$b = 0.66$, $p < .001$	[−0.03, 0.10]
Childhood	Behavior	$b = -0.17$, $p < .001$	$b = 0.68$, $p < .001$	[−0.20, −0.05]
	Expectations	$b = -0.17$, $p = .001$	$b = 0.53$, $p < .001$	[−0.14, −0.04]
	Expectations (exploratory)	$b = -0.17$, $p < .001$	$b = 0.67$, $p < .001$	[−0.18, −0.05]

Note. The exploratory measure of trust expectations involved removing three reverse-scored items in the expectations scale that reduced reliability. Values in square brackets are the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval.

Results

Manipulation Check

We ran multilevel logistic models, nesting observations within participants, with both manipulations as interactive predictors (high = 1; low = −1) of the manipulation check, see Table 13. The manipulation of childhood context functioned as intended and did not spill over into perceptions of current context. The manipulation of current context also functioned as intended and similarly strongly, but it also produced a small spillover on perceptions of childhood context.

Besides these effects, participants described the targets in lower class contexts as less White, more Black, and more liberal. As in Studies 1a/b, we treated these effects as potential confounds, and the Supplemental Material therefore reports exploratory robustness checks that control for these demographic perceptions and replicate the findings reported below.

Trust

Table 14 reports the correlations between behavioral trust game behavior, trust expectations, and perceived morality (separately for each type of target, for the sake of transparency, as the correlations with behavior were higher for real acquaintances). Once again, trust expectations and perceived morality were very highly correlated with each other and less strongly correlated with trust game behavior.

We used similar (linear, rather than logistic) multilevel models as those described in the manipulation check section to predict trust game behavior and trust expectations, see Table 15 and Figure 4.

These models replicated the findings from Study 2 (including the effects being directionally stronger when we used the more reliable, exploratory version of the scale that omitted reverse-scored items): Participants transferred more money ($d = 0.22$) and reported greater trust expectations ($d = 0.26$) with the target from a lower compared to the higher childhood context (darker vs. lighter bars). They also transferred more money to targets from lower current class contexts ($d = 0.24$), but reported *lower* trust expectations ($d = -0.19$) with these targets, compared to their targets from higher class contexts (blue vs. purple bars). In other words, participants transferred more money to targets from lower current class contexts even though they expected them to generally be *less* trustworthy.

Mediation by Morality

We used the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012) to estimate the indirect effects of each class context manipulation (effect coded as above) on trust game behavior and trust expectations, via perceived morality, see Table 16.

The *b*-link column in Table 16 shows that, as in Study 2, participants always trusted targets whom they perceived as more moral (controlling for the class context manipulation). The *a*-link column shows that participants saw targets from a lower childhood class context as more moral than targets from a higher childhood class context (like in Study 2), but that they saw targets from a lower *current* class context as *less* moral than targets from a higher childhood class context (in Study 2 this effect was null).[1] Accordingly, the indirect effect column shows again that the key pathway through class-based stereotypes of morality helps explain why people trust others from lower *childhood* class contexts. This column also shows that perceptions of morality also helped account for the diverging effects of current class context: People saw those from current *higher* class contexts as more moral, which was in turn linked to expecting them to be more trustworthy. Morality perceptions were also linked to transferring more money in the trust game, but at least one other more potent pathway must be operating: Overall, participants perceived targets from current higher class contexts as *more* moral, but transferred them *less* money.

Discussion

Study 3 replicated Study 2's findings for childhood class contexts, with clearer effects on trust expectations and including when participants personally knew the targets. Participants saw targets who grew up in lower (vs. higher) class contexts as more moral and expected them to be more trustworthy; they also transferred them more money in the trust game. This is straightforwardly in line with our theoretical reasoning and confirms the literature on class stereotypes while extending it to behavioral trust. Moreover, exploratory analyses of Studies 2 and 3 (see Supplemental Material) found that participants' trust expectations mediated their more trusting behavior in the trust game toward targets from low childhood contexts (we do not report these analyses for Studies 1a/1b, given that those studies' class context manipulation was confounded and perhaps therefore did not consistently influence trust expectations). Our final study preregistered a test of trust expectations as a mediator, under the theoretical premise that participants might transfer larger amounts to targets from low-childhood-class contexts, *because* they expect these targets to be more trustworthy.

Our findings regarding current class contexts add nuance to the stereotype literature: The stereotype linking lower class contexts to morality seems specific to childhood, not current, class contexts. In fact, participants saw targets who currently occupy lower (vs. higher) class contexts as *less* moral and expected them to be *less* trustworthy. However, participants nonetheless transferred more money to these targets in the trust game. This prompted us to ask why participants did this—if trust expectations where not their guide, what was?

Our final study also tackled this question, after exploratory analyses of our existing data provisionally tested two plausible answers. On the one hand, participants might have been deferring to perceived norms (Dunning et al., 2019) mandating kindness toward others who are currently in need. Such norms might apply more strongly to behavior (which impacts targets) than to confidentially reported expectations (which do not). Consistent with this idea, participants in Study 1a reported wanting to show more respect to the target from a low-class context, and this statistically mediated their larger transfers to this target (indirect effect: 95% CI [−0.87, −0.29]; see Supplemental Material). However, this mechanism was not significant in any of the three supplemental studies that tested it.

On the other hand, participants might have altruistically maximized the utility of their action (Cox, 2004), sending more money to whoever appeared to need it more at the moment. Consistent with

[1] When we separated the data into conditions, participants who pictured imaginary targets (like targets in Study 2) saw no difference in morality based on current status, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(247.85) = 0.40$, $p = .692$ (like participants in Study 2). It was participants who pictured real acquaintances who saw those with currently high social class as more moral, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(269.08) = 2.39$, $p = .018$.

Table 13
Participants' Guesses of Targets' Demographics, Study 3

Demographic variable	Class context manipulation	Target condition: Low	Target condition: High	Difference between target
Child context: % selecting high	Child	20	89	$logOR = 1.99$, $z = 8.18$, $p < .001$
	Current	51	57	$logOR = 0.32$, $z = 2.60$; $p = .009$
Current context: % selecting high	Child	64	62	$logOR = 0.001$, $z = 0.004$; $p = .997$
	Current	30	97	$logOR = 2.15$, $z = 9.84$, $p < .001$
Race: % White	Child	46	64	$logOR = 0.67$, $z = 5.56$, $p < .001$
	Current	51	57	$logOR = 0.18$, $z = 1.69$; $p = .092$
Race: % Black	Child	51	70	$logOR = -3.61$, $z = 6.91$, $p < .001$
	Current	57	62	$logOR = -0.51$, $z = 1.84$; $p = .066$
Gender: % man	Child	39	40	$logOR = 0.01$, $z = 0.14$; $p = .887$
	Current	38	40	$logOR = 0.04$, $z = .454$, $p = .650$
Age: *M* (*SD*)	Child	34.24 (10.31)	33.27 (10.89)	$b = -0.23$, $t(411) = 0.84$, $p = .403$
	Current	33.00 (10.29)	34.48 (10.87)	$b = 0.51$, $t(400) = 1.91$, $p = .057$
Politics: *M* (*SD*)	Child	3.75 (1.51)	3.91 (1.66)	$b = 0.11$, $t(545) = 1.86$, $p = .064$
	Current	3.64 (1.49)	4.01 (1.66)	$b = 0.19$, $t(532) = 3.29$, $p = .001$

Note. We counted as White and Black only targets who participants indicated were monoracial. Other race categories were selected too infrequently to analyze. Some participants reported picturing a target of no particular gender; we excluded them from the gender analysis, and made gender a binary variable by including nonbinary targets ($n = 2$) with women targets. *OR* = odds ratio.

this idea, participants in Study 1a also reported that giving resources to the target from a lower class context was a more kind and generous action, and this too statistically mediated their larger transfers to this target (indirect effect: 95% CI [−0.85, −0.19]; see Supplemental Material). Moreover, two of three supplemental studies that tested this altruism mechanism supported it.

None of these studies manipulated specifically *current* social class context, but on the strength of these exploratory results, our final study predicted that altruistic motives explain why participants exhibit more trusting behavior toward targets from low compared to high-current-class contexts.

Study 4

In Study 4 (preregistered at https://osf.io/r5yfa/), participants completed a trust game alongside a scenario-based measure of trust, which provided a more realistic setting for trust behavior. Regarding childhood class context, we predicted participants would behave more trustingly toward targets from lower childhood class contexts on all trust measures, and trust expectations would explain both of these effects. We predicted further that altruism would also explain the effect on the trust game, but not on the scenarios, where trust did not entail the transfer of material resources. Finally, we predicted that perceived morality would be an upstream mediator in all cases (people see targets from low-childhood-class contexts as more moral, and they both trust and want to help others they see as moral).

Regarding current class context, we predicted participants would behave more trustingly toward targets from lower current class contexts only on the trust game, and that altruism would explain this effect. We made no predictions for how current class context would influence scenario behavior.

Figure 5 illustrates our preregistered mediation predictions. We note, however, that these correlational analyses cannot firmly establish the causality of the mechanism variables or their temporal sequence; for this, our theorizing awaits further testing.

Method

Participants

We collected data from 800 U.S. participants through Prolific. Similar to previous studies, we excluded 128 participants who failed a comprehension check about the rules of the game. The final sample of $N = 672$ (see Table 1 for demographics) could detect

Table 14
Correlations Between Measures for Each Combination of Current and Childhood Target Class Context, and Separately for Imaginary Targets Versus Real Acquaintances, Study 3

Target condition	Behavior and expectation: Im	Behavior and expectation: Acq	Behavior and morality: Im	Behavior and morality: Acq	Expectation and morality: Im	Expectation and morality: Acq
Low childhood, low current	.43	.61	.45	.66	.73	.85
Low childhood, high current	.18	.40	.26	.40	.73	.75
High childhood, low current	.38	.52	.49	.61	.82	.87
High childhood, high current	.42	.56	.47	.54	.73	.79

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$. Im = Imaginary; Acq = Acquaintance.

Table 15
Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Trust Game Behavior and Trust Expectations, Study 3

	Trust game behavior				Trust expectation				Trust expectation *exploratory* (no reverse-scored item)			
Coefficient	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*P*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Intercept	7.18	0.15	47.67	<.001	4.74	0.05	98.96	<.001	4.85	0.06	81.10	<.001
Current class	**−0.55**	**0.12**	**4.49**	**<.001**	**0.14**	**0.04**	**3.51**	**<.001**	**0.17**	**0.05**	**3.61**	**<.001**
Childhood class	**−0.51**	**0.12**	**4.14**	**<.001**	**−0.20**	**0.04**	**4.84**	**<.001**	**−0.26**	**0.05**	**5.40**	**<.001**
Interaction	−0.03	0.12	0.23	.817	−0.04	0.04	0.97	.332	−0.06	0.05	1.22	.225

Note. Rows containing the key hypothesis test are bolded. *SE* = standard error.

between-subjects effects of $d = .28$ or greater with 80% power at the conventional α of .05.

Procedure

In a fully between-subjects design, participants pictured one hypothetical target using the same procedure as Study 3, but using initials (K. M., C. B., M. S., and A. T.) rather than gender-neutral names, which some participants might interpret as unambiguously gendered and which were White-sounding.

Participants then completed two measures of trust behavior, in counterbalanced order. They played the trust game as in Studies 2 and 3. In addition, they reported how likely they were (from 0% absolutely unlikely to 100% absolutely likely) to behaviorally trust the target in one of two scenarios (see Supplemental Material for verbatim materials). One scenario asked participants to imagine needing someone to take care of their cat for a week and to decide whether to trust the target to be kind to their cat and make sure all her needs are met. The other asked them to imagine being on a voice call to determine whether they or the target would take on an undesirable task for their social group and to decide whether to trust the target to flip a coin and honestly report the result. In these scenarios, targets did not gain anything material or financial from participant's trust, which we expected would limit the role of altruism. Each participant was randomly assigned to see only one scenario; the Supplemental Material tests each scenario individually with virtually indistinguishable results.

After each measure of trust behavior, participants completed three sets of ratings related to that behavior (see Table 17; all items used a scale from 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*extremely*]): Relevant to our predictions, they reported trust expectations and altruistic motives. They also reported social desirability pressure, which we included as an alternative mechanism in our mediation analyses, to ensure effects through our theorized pathways were independent of this.

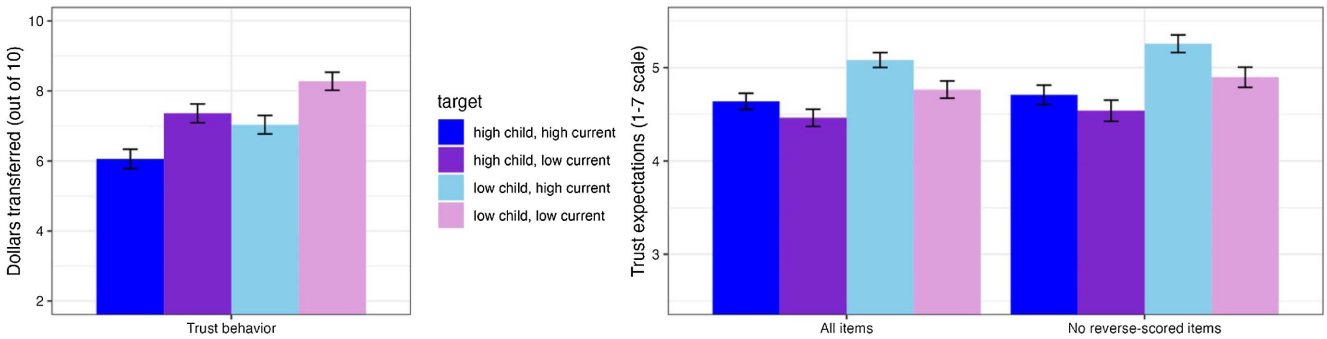
We assessed these constructs specifically in relation to the trust behavior, in contrast to the more general measures in Studies 2 and 3, and without the limitations we noted for the measure of trust expectations used in Studies 1a and 1b: Rather than report how many tickets the target would return, participants reported whether the target would do the right and fair thing, and take their needs into account. Participants then completed the measure of perceived morality from the previous studies (α = .97), completed a manipulation check and made guesses about the target's demographics, completed the trust game comprehension check, and reported their own demographics.

Results

Manipulation Check

We ran logistic regression models with both manipulations as interactive predictors (high = 1; low = −1) of the manipulation check, see Table 18. Both manipulations functioned as intended, with similar strengths, and with no spillover between childhood and current class contexts. Besides these effects, participants described the targets in lower class contexts as less White, more Black, and more liberal. As in previous studies, we treated these effects as potential confounds, and the Supplemental Material therefore

Figure 4
Trust Behavior and Trust Expectations Toward Targets From Different Class Contexts, Study 3



Note. Error bars represent standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 16
Mediation Models Predicting Trust From Social Class Through Perceived Morality, Study 3

Class context manipulation	Trust measure	*a* link (class → morality)	*b* link (morality → trust)	Indirect effect
Current	Behavior	$b = 0.11$, $p = .027$	$b = 1.43$, $p < .001$	[0.02, 0.29]
	Expectations	$b = 0.11$, $p = .027$	$b = 0.70$, $p < .001$	[0.01, 0.14]
	Expectations (exploratory)	$b = 0.11$, $p = .027$	$b = 0.66$, $p < .001$	[0.01, 0.18]
Childhood	Behavior	$b = -0.27$, $p < .001$	$b = 1.35$, $p < .001$	[−0.49, −0.22]
	Expectations	$b = -0.27$, $p < .001$	$b = 0.70$, $p < .001$	[−0.25, −0.12]
	Expectations (exploratory)	$b = -0.27$, $p < .001$	$b = 0.87$, $p < .001$	[−0.32, −0.15]

Note. The exploratory measure of trust expectations involved removing three reverse-scored items in the expectations scale that reduced reliability. Values in square brackets are the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval.

reports exploratory robustness checks that control for these demographic perceptions and replicate the findings reported below.

Trust Behavior, Trust Expectations, and Other Mediators

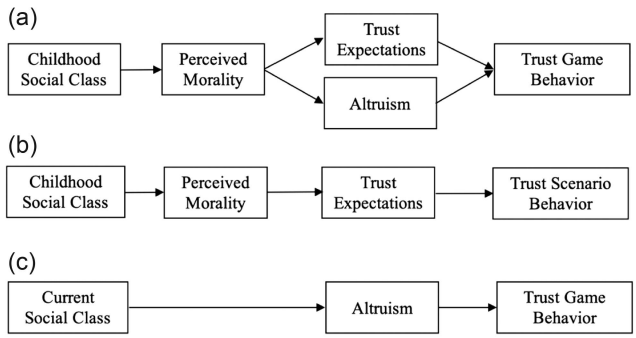
Table 19 reports the correlations between the mediators, trust game behavior, and trust game scenario behavior. As expected, participants' altruistic motives were more strongly related to their behavior in the trust game, where trust entailed a transfer of material resources (r of .52), than in the scenarios, where it did not (r of .42, Fisher's $z = 2.35$, $p = .019$).

We used similar (linear, rather than logistic) models as those described in the manipulation check section to predict trust game and trust scenario behaviors, see Figure 6. The Supplemental Material reports the results from full models; but because the interactions between childhood and current class were not significant, trust game: $b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(668) = -1.15$, $p = .249$; trust scenario: $b = -1.16$, $SE = 0.99$, $t(668) = -1.18$, $p = .239$; for simplicity, Table 20 reports only the coefficients for the main effects (including main effects for the mechanism variables, which we preregistered testing as part of the mediation models).

We first examined effects of childhood class contexts. Participants transferred more money ($d = 0.28$) to the target whose childhood class context was low compared to high; they also reported being more likely to behaviorally trust that target in the scenarios where doing so did not yield a financial benefit to the target ($d = 0.34$). They expected this same target to be more trustworthy ($d_{game} = 0.20$, $d_{scenario} = 0.28$) was more altruistically motivated to help them ($d_{game} = 0.42$, $d_{scenario} = 0.37$) and perceived them as more moral ($d = 0.43$). All these results are consistent with our theoretical model. Participants did not feel more pressure to act in socially desirable ways toward a target from a lower childhood class context.

We next examined effects of current class contexts. Even though, as expected, participants reported greater trust game altruism toward targets in low- compared to high-current-class contexts ($d = 0.61$), they did not transfer these targets more money (though directionally the association was in the same direction we observed in Studies 2 and 3, $d = 0.12$). They also expected these targets to be less trustworthy in the trust game ($d = 0.35$). In the scenarios, participants had equal trust behavior ($d = 0.11$) and expectations ($d = 0.01$) for targets in high- and low-current-class contexts, though they felt more altruistic toward those in lower current class contexts ($d = 0.38$). As in Study 2, current class context did not influence perceived morality ($d = 0.09$).

Figure 5
Predicted Mediation Processes for Childhood Social Class on Trust Game Behavior (Panel a) and Trust Scenario Behavior (Panel b), and for Current Social Class on Trust Game Behavior (Panel c), Study 4



Mediation Models

We used the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012) to estimate the indirect effects of each class context manipulation (effect coded as above) on trust game behavior and trust scenario behaviors in serial models where perceived morality was the distal mediator, and trust expectations and altruism were parallel proximal mediators. The Supplemental Material presents results for all coefficients; the tables below focus on the indirect effects. The pathways from childhood class context that we anticipated (bolded text in Table 21) were significant: Participants saw targets whose childhood class context was lower as more moral; perceived morality was associated with both greater trust expectations and greater altruism; and, in turn, both trust expectations and altruism predicted trust behavior. We did not expect the indirect path through morality then altruism for scenarios, or any paths through morality then social desirability, but these emerged as independent processes.

Considering next the effects of current class context, the expected indirect pathway (bolded in Table 22) was significant: Participants felt more altruistic toward targets from current low-class contexts and, in turn, altruism related to generosity in the trust game; unexpectedly this same pattern emerged in trust scenario behavior. Notably, after accounting for the mediators, both direct effects favored targets from higher current class contexts (game: $b = 0.19$, $p = .098$; scenarios: $b = 1.51$, $p = .039$).

Table 17
Trust Expectations, Altruism, and Social Desirability Items, Study 4

Construct and α	Item
Trust expectations α_{game} = .93, $\alpha_{scenario}$ = .93	I expected this person would do the right thing in this scenario I expected this person would do the fair thing in this scenario I expected this person would take into account my needs in this scenario.
Altruism α_{game} = .92, $\alpha_{scenario}$ = .94	I wanted this person to benefit from this scenario I wanted this person to come away from this scenario having gained something I wanted to give this person what they need in this scenario.
Social desirability α_{game} = .90, $\alpha_{scenario}$ = .90	I wanted to do the socially accepted thing in this scenario I felt compelled to do what others would like in this scenario I wanted to make decision others would think I should.

Discussion

People with lower *childhood* class contexts were perceived as more moral and trustworthy, and others wanted to help them and ultimately trusted them more; this was true across contexts and situations. This differed strikingly from the effects of current class context. People with lower *current* class contexts were perceived as no more moral or trustworthy, though they did elicit more altruism which was related to behavioral trust. Across analyses, altruism played more of a role than we anticipated—perhaps people view trusting as the generous thing to do even when it does not entail material resources.

We stress that Study 4 measured the mechanisms and cannot confirm their causal influence. We ordered them in a sequence guided by theory but further experimental testing is necessary for firm conclusions.

General Discussion

Seventeen preregistered studies generally found people behave with more trust toward others from lower compared to higher social class contexts. This was true even though in many cases trustees stood to make material gains from betraying trust and across many methodological variations: within- and between-participant designs, real and hypothetical trust paradigms, economic games and imagined scenarios, strangers and acquaintances, manipulations conveyed via casual speech and objective data, and current and childhood class contexts. However, this consistency masks important nuances, which we unpack next.

Childhood Versus Current Class Contexts

Our work highlights the important distinction between childhood and current class contexts. Participants generally trusted and perceived as moral others whose *childhoods* were spent in low-class contexts. Participants sometimes behaviorally trusted others from *current* low-class contexts, but did not perceive them as trustworthy—in fact, in Studies 2–4, participants often perceived these targets as *un*trustworthy—or as moral—in fact, in Study 3, participants perceived them as *im*moral (particularly if they were real acquaintances).

Most work that examines both childhood and current contexts focuses on questions about social mobility (e.g., Destin & Debrosse, 2017; Houle, 2011; Koo et al., 2023; Perez et al., 2023). These questions are important, but work seeking to answer them emphasizes interactions rather than independent main effects, and sometimes

Table 18
Participants' Guesses of Targets' Demographics, Study 4

Demographic variable	Class context manipulation	Target condition: Low	Target condition: High	Difference between target
Child context: % selecting high	Child	21	93	$logOR = 1.97$, $z = 15.35$, $p < .001$
	Current	60	57	$logOR = -0.09$, $z = 0.55$; $p = .585$
Current context: % selecting high	Child	55	57	$logOR = 0.12$, $z = 0.97$; $p = .331$
	Current	22	96	$logOR = 2.26$, $z = 14.06$, $p < .001$
Race: % White	Child	34	62	$logOR = 0.58$, $z = 7.16$, $p < .001$
	Current	45	51	$logOR = 0.13$, $z = 1.64$; $p = .101$
Race: % Black	Child	30	13	$logOR = -0.55$, $z = 5.22$, $p < .001$
	Current	26	18	$logOR = -0.29$, $z = 2.77$; $p = .006$
Gender: % man	Child	72	77	$logOR = -0.12$, $z = 1.37$; $p = .171$
	Current	73	75	$logOR = -0.06$, $z = 0.69$, $p = .489$
Age: *M* (*SD*)	Child	29.78 (7.26)	29.18 (6.17)	$b = -0.32$, $t(668) = 1.25$, $p = .211$
	Current	28.38 (6.41)	30.64 (6.90)	$b = 1.12$, $t(668) = 4.41$, $p < .001$
Politics: *M* (*SD*)	Child	3.75 (1.51)	3.91 (1.66)	$b = 0.14$, $t(668) = 2.39$, $p = .001$
	Current	3.64 (1.49)	4.01 (1.66)	$b = 0.19$, $t(668) = 3.38$, $p < .001$

Note. We counted as White and Black only targets who participants indicated were monoracial. Other race categories were selected too infrequently to analyze. Some participants reported picturing a target of no particular gender; we excluded them from the gender analysis, and made gender a binary variable by including nonbinary targets ($n = 2$) with women targets. *OR* = odds ratio.

Table 19
Correlation Table for Key-Dependent Measures, Study 4

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Trust game									
1. Trust behavior ($)	—								
2. Trust expectations	.30	—							
3. Altruism	.52	.39	—						
4. Social desirability	.09	.39	.27	—					
Trust scenario									
5. Trust behavior (%)	.25	.32	.26	.13	—				
6. Trust expectations	.22	.52	.38	.21	.65	—			
7. Altruism	.22	.33	.55	.36	.42	.49	—		
8. Social desirability	.02	.35	.22	.70	.20	.31	.45	—	
9. Morality	.29	.54	.40	.25	.63	.63	.46	.29	—

Note. All correlation coefficients are significant with at least $p < .05$, except for social desirability in the trust scenario behavior.

examines only some rather than all possible combinations of higher and lower class current and childhood contexts (e.g., comparing perceptions of the upwardly mobile vs. the stably high).

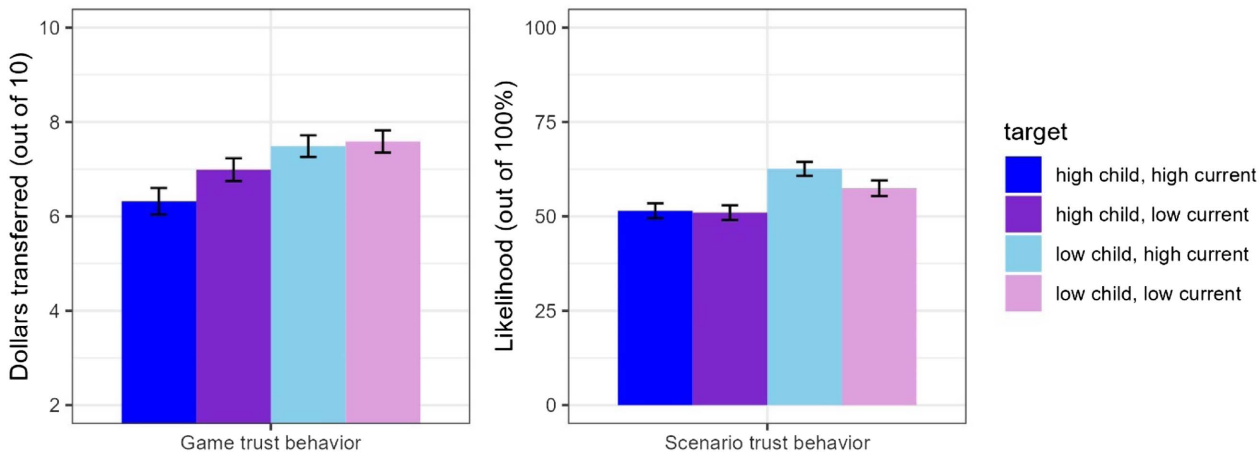
Outside of work on social mobility, some nascent literature examines the different experiences and self-perceptions linked with childhood versus current class context (e.g., Côté et al., 2021; Laurin et al., 2024). Our investigation extends this research in that it is the first empirical investigation to manipulate targets' childhood and current social class contexts separately to test how they influence others' perceptions.

Had we always conflated childhood and current class contexts (as in our Studies 1a and 1b) or included only one of them (as in most of our Supplemental Material studies), we would not have uncovered this important difference. Less obviously, but still importantly, manipulating only one of these contexts can inadvertently spill over into the other. Indeed, this happened in Studies 2 and 3 even when we used orthogonal manipulations in an effort to prevent this. There may be published studies—for example, those on social class stereotypes—where a manipulation of targets' current income may have exerted its influence by shifting perceptions of targets' childhood circumstances or vice versa.

What Guides Trust Decisions?

Our work also contributes to ongoing debates about how to interpret trust behavior. Existing literature suggests that people's decisions about who to trust are in part based on their trust expectations (e.g., Evans & Krueger, 2016) and in part on other factors such as norms (e.g., Dunning et al., 2019; see also Fetchenhauer et al., 2020). Our findings illustrate both sides of this debate. On the one hand, participants' trust behavior and their trust expectations were influenced in the same direction by targets' childhood class context, and expectations mediated some of the effect on behavior. This is consistent with people deciding to trust those whom they expect to honor their decision; further consistent with this idea, correlations between trust and expectations were as high as .61 for targets participants knew in Study 3.

Figure 6
Trust Behaviors in the Game and Scenario Toward Targets From Different Class Contexts



Note. Error bars represent standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 20
Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Trust Behaviors and Mediators, Study 4

	Childhood class context				Current class context			
Dependent variable	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Trust game								
Trust behavior ($)	−0.44	0.12	−3.57	<.001	−0.19	0.12	−1.55	.121
Trust expectations	−0.18	0.07	−2.56	.011	0.31	0.07	4.60	<.001
Altruism	−0.35	0.06	−5.49	<.001	−0.50	0.06	−7.88	<.001
Social desirability	−0.11	0.07	−1.53	.128	−0.09	0.07	−1.19	.236
Trust scenario								
Trust behavior (%)	−4.39	0.99	−4.44	<.001	1.40	0.99	1.42	.157
Trust expectations	−0.22	0.06	−3.57	<.001	−0.01	0.06	−0.10	.918
Altruism	−0.32	0.07	−4.80	<.001	−0.32	0.07	−4.93	<.001
Social desirability	−0.19	0.07	−2.73	.007	−0.04	0.07	−0.56	.578
Morality	−0.25	0.05	−5.54	<.001	0.05	0.05	1.20	.229

Note. *SE* = standard error.

On the other hand, participants' trust behavior and their trust expectations were *not* influenced in the same direction by targets' current class context, and altruism played a stronger mediating role. This is consistent with people deciding to trust based on factors besides their trust expectations; further consistent with this idea, correlations between trust and expectations were as low as .18 in both Studies 2 and 3 for targets participants did not know.

One question arising from these findings is when trust behavior will vary with trust expectations, and when it will instead be a function of something else. There may be important moderators that our data cannot speak to. Descriptively, in Study 3, behavior and expectations were more linked for acquaintances than for imaginary targets. This was not a significant difference, but its direction may be surprising: People have a rich history with acquaintances that could supply alternative guides to behavior, diminishing the role of expectations. Alternatively, people might be more confident, and thus more likely to act on, expectations of the future behavior of people they know well. Our understanding of these dynamics could benefit from future research.

Practical Implications: A Social Advantage of Lower Class Contexts?

Our findings suggest that people from lower class contexts are likely to be on the receiving end of behavioral trust more often than those from higher class contexts. This could have important consequences if those in power are frequently in the position of choosing to trust people whose class contexts vary. However, this may happen relatively infrequently. Economic segregation in neighborhoods and social circles means people are more likely to encounter those with similar (vs. different) class contexts to their own (Marques, 2012; Quillian, 2012; Thal, 2017). If a wealthy manager recruits for a job opening by consulting their network, the applications they receive may all be from similarly wealthy backgrounds, and the manager may have little opportunity to choose an applicant from a lower class context. Also, those from lower (compared to higher) social class contexts tend to (inaccurately) expect others to view them as less moral (Engstrom et al., 2024), which might make them less likely to put themselves in the running for positions that require others to trust them. Future research might examine whether this is true.

However, upward mobility is not always overtly visible. This leaves space for engaging in self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982). If greater trust is one reputational benefit afforded to those from lower (particularly childhood) class contexts, this may incentivize broadcasting signals—genuine or deceptive—that communicate humble upbringings (see also Arnett & Sidanius, 2018; Koo et al., 2023). Claims like these are common, for example, in politics. Future work might examine whether and how observers can distinguish true from false claims, and identify what costs might accompany claims of humble upbringings (see Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

Table 21
Indirect Effects of Childhood Social Class on Trust Behaviors Through Mediators, Study 4

	Game			Scenario		
Mediating path: Class → _____ → Behavior	*b*	*SE*	CI	*b*	*SE*	CI
Morality	−0.04	0.03	[−0.10, 0.02]	−1.84	0.40	[−2.66, −1.09]
Trust expectations	0.01	0.02	[−0.02, 0.04]	−0.06	0.34	[−0.73, 0.62]
Altruism	−0.18	0.06	[−0.30, −0.07]	−0.19	0.12	[−0.47, −0.00]
Social desirability	0.00	0.01	[−0.03, 0.03]	0.08	0.08	[−0.05, 0.28]
Morality, then trust expectations	**−0.05**	**0.02**	**[−0.09, −0.01]**	**−1.41**	**0.31**	**[−2.05, −0.84]**
Morality, then altruism	**−0.12**	**0.03**	**[−0.18, −0.07]**	−0.21	0.11	[−0.44, −0.02]
Morality, then social desirability	0.02	0.01	[0.01, 0.04]	0.11	0.05	[0.01, 0.22]

Note. The key hypothesis test are bolded. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

Table 22
Indirect Effects of Current Social Class on Trust Behaviors Through Mediators, Study 4

Mediating path: Class → _____ → Behavior	Game			Scenario		
	b	*SE*	CI	*b*	*SE*	CI
Morality	0.01	0.01	[−0.01, 0.04]	0.40	0.35	[−0.27, 1.12]
Trust expectations	0.05	0.03	[0.01, 0.11]	−0.35	0.33	[−1.00, 0.29]
Altruism	**−0.50**	**0.07**	**[−0.64, −0.37]**	−0.57	0.24	[−1.07, −0.14]
Social desirability	0.02	0.01	[−0.01, 0.05]	0.07	0.08	[−0.07, 0.25]
Morality, then trust expectations	0.01	0.01	[−0.01, 0.03]	0.31	0.27	[−0.21, 0.86]
Morality, then altruism	0.03	0.03	[−0.02, 0.09]	0.06	0.06	[−0.04, 0.20]
Morality, then social desirability	−0.00	0.00	[−0.01, 0.00]	−0.03	0.03	[−0.09, 0.02]

Note. The key hypothesis test are bolded. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

Limitations

Our studies used multiple operationalizations of social class context, and varied targets' gender, but not their race. Moreover, many of the names we used in our studies were likely White-coded, and even when we strove to avoid this by using initials, participants were ultimately left to picture the targets' race based on their own biases and assumptions. Thus, we are not able to comment on intersectional race and social class stereotypes (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2021; Mattan et al., 2019). As well, our samples covered three different countries, but ones that on the whole are culturally similar (the Supplemental Material reports results of additional studies conducted in Western Europe and in Singapore that are consistent with results of our main studies). Social class stereotypes differ across countries, for example, based on the country's income inequality (Durante et al., 2014) or history of communist governance (Grigoryan et al., 2020; see also Wu et al., 2018), so our effects might also differ across countries. Our samples also had a restricted range of participant class context: Undergraduate samples are by definition not at the lowest point of the spectrum, and online survey workers must at least own or have access to a smartphone or computer. With a more diverse range of participants, we might have found more effects of participant class context. As previously mentioned, our designs provide limited insights into causal effects of the mediating variables. We cannot definitively conclude, for instance, that perceiving targets as moral causes people to expect them to honor their trust.

Our investigation focused on the difference between low- and high-class contexts (plus a control condition in which class was unknown in Study 1a), inviting questions about how much people trust others from middle-class contexts. A linear hypothesis could argue that trust in middle class others might be in between the lower and the upper class (see also Boon-Falleur et al., 2024). For instance, people might stereotype others in middle-class contexts as moderately moral. Alternatively, a quadratic hypothesis might argue that trust in middle-class others—who we might think of as the average person—could be the highest of all. Other possibilities exist, and there is no reason to assume that the answer will be the same for childhood and current class contexts. We therefore leave this for future studies to unpack.

Conclusion

Our research asked who benefits from others' trust, and found that on the whole people prefer to trust others from lower social class contexts, specifically when those contexts characterized their early lives. Our research did not ask who *should* benefit from others' trust—that is, we did not ask whether people's current or childhood class context is associated with their actual trustworthiness or their prosociality more broadly. The literature linking prosociality with social class is mixed (e.g., Fiddick et al., 2013; Korndörfer et al., 2015; Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Ma et al., 2011; Piff et al., 2010; Stamos et al., 2020; Stellar et al., 2012; Varnum et al., 2015). Moreover, some work finds that people can have inaccurate, or even completely backward, perceptions of the mental states of others from higher and lower class contexts (e.g., Koo et al., 2023). The current findings thus set the stage for future investigations into misplaced trust, missed opportunities for trust, and their consequences across the social class spectrum.

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