

Dissecting Whiteness: Consistencies and Differences in the Stereotypes of Lower- and Upper-class White US Americans

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Author Note

The first and fourth authors use they/them pronouns, the second and fifth authors use he/him pronouns, and the third author uses she/her pronouns.

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Abstract

Economic inequality is increasing in the United States, making categorization and stereotyping based on social class more likely. Yet, social class stereotypes have received relatively little attention. Focusing on spontaneously generated stereotypes of different White lower-class and upper-class groups in the United States, we find consistencies and differences across groups. Lower-class groups were stereotyped as poor, uneducated, dirty, and lacking ability, while upper-class groups were stereotyped as rich, arrogant, and lacking sociability. Stereotypes for all groups were largely negative but there were notable variations in stereotype valence, sociability, morality, ability, and assertiveness as well as perceived attitudes towards the groups within each social class, highlighting the importance of moving beyond a monolithic view of “the rich” and “the poor.”

Keywords: stereotypes; social class; White groups; upper-class; lower-class

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The gap between “the rich” and “the poor” has widened in many countries, including the United States (Hoffman et al., 2020). Because economic inequality makes categorization and stereotyping based on social class more likely and more extreme (Peters et al., 2021; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2022), it is important to have a nuanced understanding of the nature of these social class categories. However, social class stereotypes have received relatively little attention compared to stereotypes associated with other demographic dimensions such as race, gender, or sexual orientation (Durante et al., 2017).

Most insights about social class stereotypes come from the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002). This model suggests that societal relations inform stereotypes such that high status groups are stereotyped as competent, whereas low status groups are stereotyped as incompetent, and that groups that are perceived to be helpful are stereotyped as warm, whereas groups that are perceived as intending to harm oneself or one’s group are perceived as cold. Stereotypes thus cluster along two dimensions: Warmth and competence. While stereotypes of groups can fall into all four resulting quadrants (i.e., competent and warm; incompetent and warm; competent and cold; incompetent and cold), stereotypes are often ambivalent (i.e., positive on one dimension and negative on the other).

Social class stereotypes follow this type of ambivalent pattern, with upper-class groups stereotyped as competent but cold, and lower-class groups stereotyped as incompetent but warm. This pattern can serve an inequality-maintaining function (Durante et al., 2013): By attributing high levels of competence to upper-class groups, their wealth and status appears meritocratic. To compensate, not appear biased, and maintain positive, stable group

relations, lower-class groups are in turn stereotyped as high in warmth, but low in competence (Durante et al., 2013; see also Judd et al., 2005).

However, while the SCM has provided valuable insights into social class stereotypes, recent evidence suggests that the methods typically used in SCM research may overlook important stereotype dimensions (Nicolas et al., 2022). More specifically, most stereotyping research, including research on social class stereotypes, asks participants to rate different groups using a pre-defined list of items (e.g., Durante et al., 2017; Loughnan et al., 2014), restricting the dimensions that groups can be rated high or low on. Indeed, when assessing spontaneously generated stereotypes via open responses, additional stereotype dimensions such as health, appearance, and deviance emerge (Nicolas et al., 2022). We will therefore focus on spontaneous stereotypes to paint a nuanced and rich picture of social class stereotypes.

Social Class and Race

In addition to potentially overlooking important nuances due to methodological limitations, the literature on social class stereotypes also generally does not distinguish between different sub-groups within “the rich” and “the poor” (e.g., ignoring regional differences) and does not attend to conflating identities such as race. In the United States, race and social class are closely linked in people’s minds. For example, some of the most commonly listed stereotypes of White¹ people are “high status” and “rich,” whereas Black people are stereotyped as “poor” and “uneducated” (Ghavami & Peplau, 2010). As a result, it is unclear whether research on the stereotypes of lower-class Americans are indeed about class or a reflection of racial stereotypes. On the other hand, stereotypes are often informed by the stereotypes of higher status groups. For example, stereotypes of “men” are largely

¹ We capitalize White to highlight to combat the view of Whiteness as invisible or as the default to which all other identities are compared, which we believe contributes to obfuscating the power and status in confers to people (see Ewing, 2020).

based on stereotypes of *White* men, and stereotypes of “Black people” are largely based on stereotypes of Black *men* (Ghavami & Peplau, 2010). To avoid these potentially conflating factors, we will therefore make race explicit in our investigation and focus on White groups specifically.

The focus on White groups addresses an issue in the social psychological literature where Whiteness is often treated as the default to which all other groups are compared (see Knowles & Peng, 2005). Such a lack of attention to White identity contributes to the construction of Whiteness as invisible, overlooking the privilege it often affords individuals, and its power to shape societal relations and confer power and status (see Frankenberg, 2001).

The focus on White groups is also particularly interesting in the context of lower-class groups because very little psychological research has thus far examined lower-class White groups specifically (for a notable exception, see Loughnan et al., 2014). Providing a more nuanced understanding of perceptions of and attitudes towards these groups is important given their role in recent political events in the United States, most notably the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Walley, 2017). Importantly, when lower- and upper-class groups *are* being discussed, it is often done in a binary way (e.g., dividing people into those with and without a bachelor’s degree), lumping together groups that differ in profound ways (e.g., regional differences or rural versus urban). For example, “the uneducated” may include the rural poor and urban small business owners, while “the educated” may include primary school teachers as well as the 1% (see Walley, 2017). Such a description lacks nuance and does not reflect the complexities of class-based identities, which are far from monolithic (Knowles et al., 2023). It is also harmful as it feeds into a narrative of “us versus them” in an increasingly polarized society. It is therefore important to develop a more nuanced and complete understanding of the different groups that fall under these broader social class-based

umbrellas (although it is important to acknowledge that White people are often already perceived in more complex ways than lower status groups; see Lorenzi-Cioldi et al., 1998).

The Current Research

In this project, we examine the stereotypes of lower-class and upper-class White groups in the United States. We contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, we contribute to understanding the stereotypes of an understudied group: lower-class White people. Second, by studying the stereotypes of multiple lower-class and upper-class groups, we provide insight into which stereotypes are shared across groups and which stereotypes are distinct. Lastly, by using spontaneously generated stereotypes, we are able to generate a nuanced, ecologically-valid picture and uncover unique stereotypes associated with different groups.

We first report in a pilot study in which participants generated labels of lower-class and upper-class White groups in the United States. This bottom-up approach ensures that the groups in the main study are meaningful and representative of (White) lower-class and upper-class groups in the United States. In an exploratory study (Study 1), participants generated stereotypes for one of ten groups that another set of participants rated in terms of valence and rated the status of the group within US society and the attitudes towards the group held by US society². Study 2 (pre-registered) used a similar procedure but examined the resulting data using automatic natural language processing techniques and also examined the sociability, morality, ability, and assertiveness of the spontaneously generated stereotypes. The resulting data paint a nuanced picture that uncovers the similarities and differences in the stereotypes of different lower-class and upper-class White groups in the United States.

Pilot Study

² This study was originally part of a set of studies investigating a different research question. However, findings did not replicate across studies and are therefore not reported here.

The aim of this pilot study was to generate a list of groups that were seen as (a) White, and (b) either lower- or upper-class, in order to use them as target groups in the main studies. This bottom-up approach (adapted from Fiske et al., 2002) ensures that the groups select are ecologically valid– prevalent in US Americans’ cultural lexicon and thus an important basis for understanding the perceptions and attitudes that individuals develop about upper-class and lower-class groups.

Method

Participants. Participants for this study were recruited via social media (Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter) and SurveyCircle, a website on which users participate in each others’ surveys. A total of 52 US Americans participated in the study. Of these, 53.85% were women, 42.31% were men, and 3.85% were non-binary. The sample was predominantly White (82.69%) and non-Hispanic (96.15%). The average age of the sample was 32.67 ($SD = 12.06$) and participants placed themselves on average on 6.85 ($SD = 1.57$) on a socioeconomic status (SES) ladder ranging from 1-10 with 10 indicating high SES.

Procedure. The study was advertised as a study on the perception of different groups within the US by US Americans. After indicating their consent, we informed participants that we were interested in White groups within the US and, more specifically, White upper and lower-class groups. Participants then provided labels for up to 5 lower- and upper-class groups respectively (order counterbalanced), before indicating the status of these groups in US society on a scale from 1 (very low status in American society) to 7 (very high status in American society). Lastly, participants provided demographic information.

Results

Participants generated a total of 246 lower-class labels and 243 upper-class labels. The labels included specific occupations (e.g., truck drivers, lawyers), regional groups (e.g., East coast, Southern), and ethnic or religious groups (e.g., Irish, Jewish), as well as broader

labels (e.g., White trash, elites). We grouped synonymous (e.g. South, Southern) and highly similar (e.g. racist, White supremacist) responses together, resulting in 30 lower-class and 33 upper-class groups (see Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of Generated Group Labels

Lower-class groups		Upper-class groups	
Group label	Frequency	Group label	Frequency
Redneck	32	Finance	15
Trailer trash	16	The 1%	13
Hillbillies	15	White collar workers	12
White trash	15	CEOs	10
Blue collar workers	10	Coastal elites	9
Racists	9	Trust fund babies	9
Farmers	8	WASPs	9
Hicks	8	College educated	8
Miners	6	Politicians	8
Factory workers	6	Soccer moms	7
Southerner	6	Tech bros	7
Drug users	5	Doctors	5
Poor	5	Golfer	5
Truck drivers	5	Lawyers	5
Uneducated	4	Old money	5
Unemployed	4	Bankers	4
Homeless	3	Celebrities	4
Jersey shore	3	Country club members	4
Hood / Ghetto	3	Elites	4
Midwest	3	Karens	4
Hard-working	3	Yuppies	4
Hippies	2	Snobs	4
Construction workers	2	Academics	4
Hunters	2	Racists	4
Irish	2	Socialites	4
Single mothers	2	Hollywood	3
Retail workers	2	Business owners	3
Karens	2	Capitalists	3
Republicans	2	Bougie	2
Clerks	2	Republicans	2
		Jewish people	2
		Junior League	2
		Multiple home owners	2

To select groups for our main studies, we narrowed the list down to groups that were (a) mentioned at least 6 times to ensure that we had a high enough number of groups to choose from but at the same time only included groups that were mentioned by substantial number of participants; (b) mentioned for either upper or lower-class groups, not both (e.g., racists); (c) could apply to all genders, not only a single one (e.g., tech bro, soccer mom) to ensure that resulting differences in stereotypes would not simply be a reflection of gender

stereotypes; and (d) were rated as above or below the midpoint in terms of status for upper and lower-class groups respectively. We then looked for parallels in the lower- and upper-class groups to match them. For example, we matched “White trash” and “WASPs” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) because they explicitly refer to Whiteness, “coastal elites” and “hillbillies” because they are regionally restricted, and “white collar workers” and “blue collar workers” because they are sometimes used as a contrast to designate lower-class and upper-class workers. The final list of lower-class groups were rednecks, hicks, hillbillies, white trash and blue collar workers. The final list of upper-class groups were coastal elites, trust fund babies, the 1%, WASPs, and white collar workers.

Study 1

In this exploratory study, participants generated stereotypes for one of the groups from the pilot study and rated the perceived status of and attitudes towards the group in US society. Additionally, a different set of participants rated the valence of the stereotypes generated by participants.

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via the Prolific website and restricted participation to non-Hispanic White middle-class US Americans and aimed for a sample size of 400 (40 per group, based on Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). We recruited middle class participants to minimize the likelihood that they would be assigned to rate their own ingroup (see Study 2 for direct tests comparing responses from ingroup vs. outgroup members). A total of 402 participants completed the study. We excluded three participants who were not US American, 4 participants who were not White or did not indicate their race, and 38 participants who identified as part of the group they were assigned to rate (the majority of these were assigned to rate “white collar workers”), resulting in a final sample size of 357.

The majority of participants identified as either lower middle class (49.5%) or upper middle class (29.97%). An additional 17.93% identified as working class, while only 1.96% identified as lower-class and only 0.28% as upper-class. The average SES, measured via a 10-point SES ladder, was 5.69 ($SD = 1.21$). The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender/sex (54.90% women, 44.54% men, 0.28% agender) and had an average age of 37.56 years ($SD = 13.75$).

Materials and procedure. We advertised the survey as a study on the perception of different groups in the US. After indicating their consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 10 groups selected based on the pilot study reported above. The number of participants per group ranged from 32 to 42. The groups included five lower-class groups (blue collar workers, hicks, hillbillies, rednecks, and White trash) and five upper-class groups (white collar workers, the 1%, coastal elites, trust fund babies, and WASPs). Participants first generated up to 10 stereotypes of the assigned group, using instructions adapted from Ghavami and Peplau (2013). In these instructions, participants were asked to think of cultural stereotypes held by people in general, even if these did not reflect their personal beliefs.

Next, participants answered a range of other questions about the group³, including the group's status within US society and US society's attitudes toward the group measured on 8-point scales from very low status/very negative to very high status/very positive (see online supplement for full list of items)⁴. Lastly, participants provided demographic information.

³ Because this study was originally part of a set of studies investigating a different research question, we included additional items measuring the prototypicality of the group of White people in the United States, the percentage of the group that was White, and how central Whiteness is to the group. Because these questions are unrelated to the current paper and results did not replicate across studies, we do not report the findings here.

⁴ These scales were originally supposed to be 7-point scales, but due to a programming error, they contained the scale point 5 twice. None of the participants pointed this error out and due to the visual arrangement of the scale, we believe that it is still interpretable in the sense that higher numbers correspond to higher status and more positive attitudes respectively

Coding and rating of stereotypes. Participants generated a total of 855 upper-class stereotypes and 873 lower-class stereotypes. Two of the authors independently generated broader labels that the individual responses could be coded as (e.g., “uneducated” was one of the labels which could be used to summarize a range of individually generated stereotypes such as “illiterate” or “highschool dropout”). They then discussed their labels and agreed on 30 labels for upper-class stereotypes and 30 labels for lower-class stereotypes.

Groups of two US American research assistants (RAs) then coded the upper-class or lower-class stereotypes respectively by assigning each individual response to one of the labels (e.g., “uneducated”). They were unaware of which specific group (e.g., redneck, the 1%) the stereotypes referred to. Duplicate responses and responses that referred to a group name (e.g., listing “rednecks” as a stereotype for “hillbillies”; 1.35% of responses) were removed prior to coding. After coding 50 stereotypes, the RAs discussed and resolved disagreements. This procedure was repeated once to increase interrater reliability. The resulting interrater reliability was $\kappa = .80$ for lower-class stereotypes and $\kappa = .66$ for upper-class stereotypes.

In addition, a group of US Americans recruited through reddit (N = 21) rated the valence of the 30 lower-class and upper-class stereotype labels on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 9 (very positive). We then calculated the positivity of stereotypes for each participant in the main study by calculating the mean valence for all stereotypes listed by the respective participant. For example, if a participant listed “illiterate,” “likes fishing,” and “sleep with family,” their stereotype valence score would be the average of the valence scores for the labels “uneducated,” “outdoorsy hobbies,” and “incestuous” as these are the labels the individual responses were coded as.

Results and Discussion

Similar to Ghavami and Peplau (2012) we defined stereotype content as the 10 most commonly listed attributes for each group. Tables 2-4 list the 10 most frequently listed

stereotypes for lower- and upper-class groups respectively. As can be gathered from these tables, for both lower- and upper-class groups, there was some consistency in stereotypes, but also unique stereotypes that only emerged for one or two groups.

Lower-class stereotypes. All lower-class groups were described as “uneducated,” “poor,” “stupid,” “drink a lot,” and having an “unkempt, dirty appearance,” although the frequency varied, suggesting that these stereotypes are more central for some groups than for others. “Poor” was listed particularly frequently for White trash and rednecks, whereas “uneducated” was more central for blue collar workers, hicks, and hillbillies.

In addition to these consistencies between groups, participants also listed unique attributes for different groups. Seemingly contradictory, blue collar workers were stereotyped as both hard-working and lazy, in addition to being described as having low-paying, manual jobs. “Live in a trailer,” “use drugs,” and “loud” was unique to White trash. Rednecks were the only group described as having outdoorsy hobbies, and hillbillies were the only group described as having bad teeth. “Incestuous” and “rural” was listed for hicks and hillbillies, who overall shared a large proportion of their stereotypes.

None of the frequently listed attributes of lower-class groups (“poor,” “uneducated,” “stupid,” and “unkempt, dirty appearance”) suggested high levels of warmth. Indeed, none of the frequently listed attributes for any of the five lower-class groups did. Contrary to findings by Durante and colleagues (2013), some of the stereotypes suggested a *lack* of warmth (e.g., “rude”). However, as suggested by the SCM, many of the listed attributes (e.g., “stupid,” “uneducated,” “unsophisticated”) suggested low levels of competence.

Table 2
Most Frequently listed Stereotypes for Lower-class Groups (Study 1)

Blue collar worker n _{participants} =32 n _{stereotypes} =167	White trash n _{participants} =39 n _{stereotypes} =296	Rednecks n _{participants} =42 n _{stereotypes} =320	Hicks n _{participants} =40 n _{stereotypes} =308	Hillbillies n _{participants} =39 n _{stereotypes} =272
Low-paying, manual work (27)	Poor (31)	Politically conservative (22)	Uneducated (25)	Uneducated (30)
Hardworking (25)	Unkempt, dirty appearance (26)	Poor (22)	Unkempt, dirty appearance (24)	Poor (24)
Uneducated (21)	Rude (24)	Racist (22)	Unsophisticated (24)	Rural (24)
Lazy (13)	Uneducated (22)	Uneducated (22)	Poor (20)	Unkempt, dirty appearance (18)
Stupid (13)	Stupid (18)	Stupid (17)	Rural (20)	Drink a lot (15)
Poor (10)	Live in a trailer (16)	Unkempt, dirty appearance (17)	Stupid (20)	Backwards (14)
Rude (10)	Racist (15)	Outdoorsy hobbies (16)	Racist (17)	Stupid (14)
Unkempt, dirty appearance (10)	Use drugs (13)	Drink a lot (15)	Drinks a lot (13)	Incestuous (13)
Drink a lot (7)	Drink a lot (11)	Narrow-minded (15)	Narrow-minded (13)	Unsophisticated (13)
	Loud (11)	Backwards (13)	Incestuous (11)	Bad teeth (12)
			Politically conservative (11)	

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to how often the attribute was listed. Only attributes listed more than five times are included.

The shading of the cells indicates how many groups share the stereotype. The darker the color, the higher the number of groups sharing the stereotype.

Upper-class stereotypes. For upper-class groups, “rich,” “arrogant,” and “privileged” was listed frequently for all five groups. Again, the frequency of these attributes varied between groups. For example, “privileged” was the most frequently listed attribute for trust fund babies, but only the 9th most frequent attribute for white collar workers.

Table 3 also includes unique attributes for each group. Only white collar workers were described as “career-focused;” WASPs were the only group described as “religious,” “politically conservative,” “boring,” and “cold;” only the 1% were described as “self-centered” and “materialistic;” trust fund babies were the only group described as “entitled,” “lazy,” and “carefree;” and only coastal elites were described as “politically liberal.”

Interestingly, none of the most frequently listed attributes of upper-class groups (“rich,” “arrogant,” and “privileged”) suggested high levels of competence. Indeed, competence-related attributes such as “intelligent” and “highly educated” were only

frequently listed for two of the five groups (white collar workers and coastal elites). Attributes that signal a *lack* of competence, such as “out of touch” and “lazy” were listed just as frequently. This stands in contrast with previous findings from the literature that indicated that upper-class people were perceived as high in competence (e.g., Durante et al., 2017), but could be explained by dividing competence into ability and assertiveness (see Abele et al., 2016). In other words, it may be that upper-class groups *are* stereotyped as high in ability but *are not* stereotyped as high in assertiveness. In line with previous findings, upper-class groups were largely stereotyped as lacking warmth (e.g., “arrogant,” “untrustworthy,” and “greedy”).

Table 3

Most Frequently listed Stereotypes for Upper-class Groups (Study 1)

White collar worker n _{participants} =19 n _{stereotypes} =137	WASPs n _{participants} =34 n _{stereotypes} =241	The 1% n _{participants} =34 n _{stereotypes} =261	Trust fund babies n _{participants} =40 n _{stereotypes} =308	Coastal elites n _{participants} =38 n _{stereotypes} =167
Rich (15)	Narrow-minded (31)	Rich (30)	Privileged (41)	Rich (33)
Arrogant (12)	Arrogant (22)	Greedy (22)	Arrogant (31)	Arrogant (27)
Powerful (11)	Rich (21)	Powerful (22)	Spoiled (25)	Politically liberal (20)
Career-focused (10)	Religious (20)	Arrogant (21)	Rich (23)	Powerful (17)
High status job (9)	Politically conservative (17)	Narrow-minded (14)	Entitled (20)	Luxurious lifestyle (16)
Untrustworthy (8)	Privileged (15)	Racist (14)	Lazy (20)	High status job (14)
Intelligent (7)	Boring (12)	Self-centered (14)	Carefree (19)	Highly educated (14)
Highly educated (6)	Racist (12)	Out of touch (11)	Out of touch (16)	Privileged (14)
Privileged (6)	Cold (10)	Privileged (11)	Luxurious lifestyle (14)	Spoiled (14)
	Powerful (8)	Materialistic (10)	Greedy (11)	Intelligent (10)
		Untrustworthy (10)	Untrustworthy (11)	Rude (10)

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to how often the attribute was listed. Only attributes listed more than five times are included.

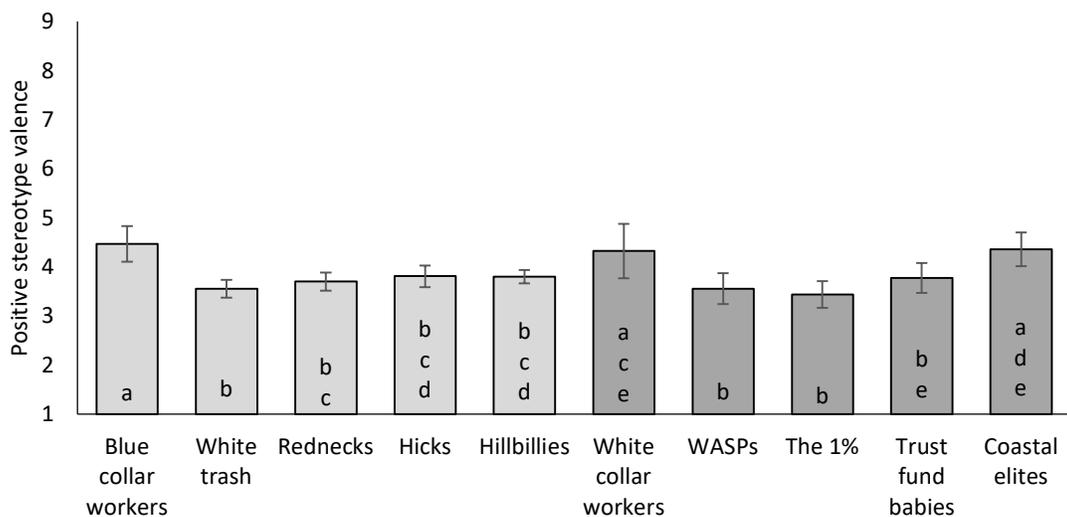
The shading of the cells indicates how many groups share the stereotype. The darker the color, the higher the number of groups sharing the stereotype.

Summary of stereotype content. Participated generated a range of different stereotypes that differed not only between social classes but also within them. In line with predictions from the SCM, lower-class groups were largely stereotyped as lacking competence, while upper-class groups were stereotyped as lacking warmth. In addition, stereotypes associated with other dimensions also emerged. In line with Nicolas and

colleagues' (2022) findings, stereotypes associated with other dimensions also emerged. Mirroring their findings, appearance-based stereotypes were also frequently mentioned, especially for lower-class groups. Other stereotypes were related to lifestyle (e.g., “live in a trailer,” “luxurious lifestyle,” “drink a lot,” or “outdoorsy hobbies”) or ideologies (e.g., “racist,” “politically conservative,” “politically liberal”).

Do perceived status, attitudes, and stereotype valence differ between groups of the same social class? Next, we examined stereotype valence, perceived status within US society, and perceived attitudes towards the groups. First, we ran a series of one-way ANOVAs to test whether the ten groups differed from each other. The results are illustrated in Figures 1-3. We found a main effect of group on stereotype valence, $F(9, 342) = 6.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$. As can be seen in Figure 1, the stereotypes of blue collar workers, white collar workers, and coastal elites were most positive, whereas the stereotypes of White trash, WASPs, and the 1% were most negative, illustrating the variability between groups of the same social class. Overall, negatives were fairly negative – they were below the midpoint of 5 for all groups.

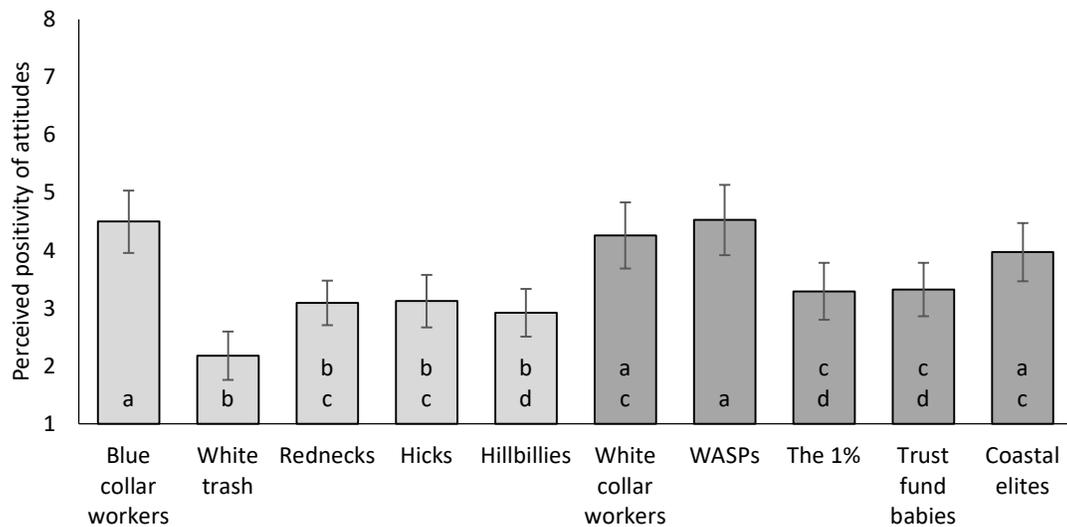
Figure 1
Stereotype valence across groups



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

For perceived attitudes towards the group, we also found a main effect of group, $F(9, 347) = 10.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$. We again found variability between groups of the same social class and a mix of lower-class groups and upper-class groups among those that were perceived to be seen most positively by US Americans, although upper-class groups were generally rated more positively. Participants believed that US society held the most positive attitudes towards blue collar workers, white collar workers, WASPs, and coastal elites and the most negative attitudes towards White trash (see Figure 2 for additional information).

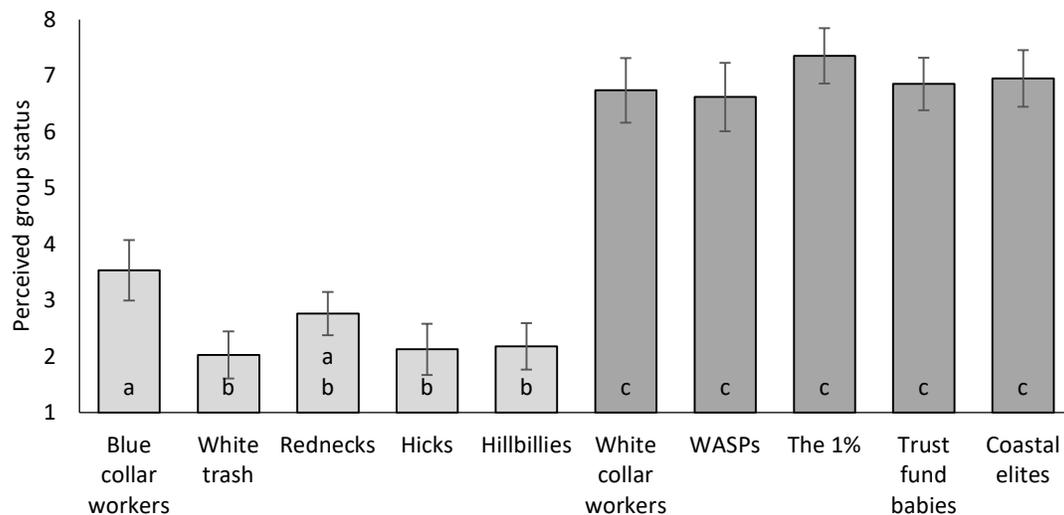
Figure 2
Perceived attitudes across groups



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Finally, for group status, we found a main effect of group, $F(9, 347) = 141.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .79$. Unsurprisingly, all lower-class groups were rated as having lower status than all upper-class groups. However, there were also differences between different lower-class groups. White trash, hicks, and hillbillies did not differ in their ratings from each other but they were rated as lower status than blue collar workers. The rating of rednecks fell in between these groups. Upper-class groups did not differ from each other (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Perceived status across groups



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Do perceived status, attitudes, and stereotype valence differ between lower-class and upper-class? Next, we tested whether, overall, lower-class groups and upper-class groups differed using the mixed model approach outlined in Judd and colleagues (2012), with target social class (lower-class vs. upper-class) as a fixed factor and target group (blue collar worker vs. White trash vs. redneck vs. hick vs. hillbilly vs. white collar worker vs. WASP vs. 1% vs. trust fund baby vs. coastal elite) as a random factor. Unsurprisingly, upper-class groups ($M = 6.93$; $SD = 1.20$) were rated as having higher status than lower-class groups ($M = 2.49$; $SD = 1.30$), $t(7.95) = -14.20$, $p < .001$, $d = -3.53$. However, perceived attitudes and valence of the freely generated stereotypes did not differ (both $ps > .153$).

Study 2

Study 1 provided interesting insights into the stereotypes of lower-class and upper-class groups in the United States. However, it also had several limitations. First, it was exploratory; indeed, the data were initially collected with a different research question in

mind. We therefore ran another study, Study 2, and pre-registered our sample size, predictions, and analyses.

Second, Study 1 used a very narrow sample, focusing only on stereotypes held by White, middle-class Americans. Stereotypes were fairly negative and it is possible that this was because all participants generated stereotypes about an *outgroup*. It is unclear whether stereotypes would have been less negative if generated by ingroup members (if upper-class participants generated upper-class stereotypes, lower-class participants generated lower-class stereotypes). Therefore, in Study 2 we recruited lower-class, middle-class, and upper-class participants and compared results across participants from different social classes.

Third, in recent years several automatic coding methodologies have been developed (e.g., see Nicolas et al., 2021; Nicolas et al., 2022). While human coders have some strength that automatic methodologies do not (e.g., they can recognize typos and can code more complex constructs), coding by human coders is also often limited in scope. For example, the number of categories need to be limited to make coding feasible and it is resource-intensive to code large numbers of responses. A multi-method approach can compensate for the weaknesses of each method and establish the robustness of findings. Therefore, compared to Study 1 (used human coders), in Study 2 we used automatic methods: k-means clustering on word embeddings, and a dictionary-based approach. This approach also enabled us to examine the warmth and competence-related content of stereotypes more directly and in more detail. In particular, some have argued that warmth should be divided into sociability (e.g., being friendly and caring) and morality (e.g., being honest and fair), while competence should be divided into ability (e.g., being intelligent and effective) and assertiveness (e.g., being decisive and strong) (see Abele et al., 2016).

Based on the patterns observed in Study 1, we predicted the following:

H1: Stereotypes of different lower-class groups and upper-class groups will differ in valence, morality, sociability, ability, and assertiveness.

H2: Overall, lower-class groups and upper-class groups will differ such that:

H2a: lower-class groups will be stereotyped as lower in ability

H2b: upper-class groups will be stereotyped as lower in sociability

We also examined whether lower-class and upper-class groups differed in morality, stereotype valence, and assertiveness as well as whether any of the results differed depending on participants' own social class.

Methods

This study was pre-registered: https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=JCB_ZJG.

Participants

We recruited White US participants via the Prolific website, deliberately sampling across the SES spectrum, and aimed for a sample size of 1500: 50 per cell in the 10 (target group: rednecks vs. hicks vs. hillbillies vs. White trash vs. blue collar workers vs. coastal elites vs. trust fund babies vs. the 1% vs. WASPs vs. white collar workers) X 3 (participant social class: lower or working class vs. lower middle class vs. upper middle or upper-class) design. In line with our pre-registration, we continued recruitment until we had at least 40 participants per cell, resulting in a final sample size of 1527. This sample size gave us 95% power to detect an effect size of $f = .13$ in the one-way ANOVAs comparing sociability, morality, ability, assertiveness, and stereotype valence across groups.

Of these, 13.88% identified as lower-class, 27.11% as working-class, 28.23% as lower middle class, 29.60% as upper middle class, and 1.18% as upper class. Because Americans are reluctant to identify as upper class or lower class (Wenger & Zaber, 2021), we grouped together those who identified as lower-class and working class as well as those identifying as upper middle class and upper class respectively. The average SES measured

via a 10-point SES ladder was 5.01 ($SD = 2.15$). In terms of gender, 49.44% of our sample were women, 48.66% were men, 1.38% were non-binary, and 0.52% listed a different label (e.g., agender; genderfluid); 2.88% of our sample identified as trans (this question was asked separately from the question about gender category). The average age of our sample was 43.20 years ($SD = 14.07$).

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Study 1, with the exception that the study ended after participants listed stereotypes for their assigned groups. The number of participants per target group ranged from 145 to 162.

Analytic Strategy

Coding Responses Based on Word Embeddings. To code the open-ended responses, we made use of machine learning-based natural language analysis, adapting the method developed by Nicolas and colleagues (2022). In particular, we represented each response via a word embedding and clustered these embeddings. Word embeddings refer to vector-based representation of a word, based on the contexts in which the word typically appears. Words with similar meanings are closer in the vector space, while words with very different meanings are further apart in the vector space. The closeness in this vector space is termed cosine similarity and can take values from -1 to 1, where higher values refer to higher similarity in usage context. For example, the words “aggressive” and “violent” likely have high cosine similarity, while the words “violent” and “potato” likely have low cosine similarity. Thus, this cosine similarity can be used to cluster words of similar context together. Word embeddings are produced via machine learning techniques, based on large bodies of text. Here, we use the language model “BAAI/bge-large-en-v1.5” (Xiao et al., 2023) which was trained on the huggingface collection of language data sets, Wikipedia, a cleaned version of the Common Crawl, discussion data from stackexchange and Reddit and

fine-tuned for similarity search tasks. This model was chosen because it led the world-wide leaderboard of the Massive Text Embedding Benchmark (MTEB; Muenninghoff et al., 2023) at time of writing.

After calculating the cosine similarity, we performed outlier detection analysis to eliminate words that were dissimilar to the other words listed. This can be thought of as analogous to a “rest” category in manual coding. Nonsensical responses (e.g., “don’t know” or “whdefhb”) as well as stereotypes that are very different from other stereotypes listed and may thus represent idiosyncratic, not culturally held, stereotypes, are removed prior to the cluster analysis. In our case, we defined outliers as all responses whose average cosine similarity with the five nearest neighbors was at least one standard deviation below the average. Note that in this study, we did not exclude stereotypes that made reference to the Whiteness of the group or that used labels for another target group (e.g., using “redneck” to describe “hicks”) as cross-group associations could provide useful insights into relations between different groups within one social class.

Next, we performed k-Means clustering analysis on the cosine similarity scores of all included words. K-means clustering groups words into different clusters, with each word falling into the cluster with the nearest center. To determine the number of clusters, we used a combination of two quality indices, the silhouette score and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC). The former compares intra-cluster distances to inter-cluster distances, the latter relates inter-cluster distances to the number of parameters used by the model. Both tend to increase with higher number of clusters up to a point and decrease if too many clusters are used. After the cluster analysis was performed, clusters with a cosine similarity of .80 or higher were combined using agglomerative clustering. To interpret and label the clusters, we examined the most central words in each cluster and chose either the most central

word or a word that represents a combination of the most central words in a cluster as the label.

Similar to Study 1, where we had different coding categories for lower-class and upper-class stereotypes, we performed this analysis twice – once for lower-class stereotypes and once for upper-class stereotypes. The python script used for this analysis can be found at <insert link>.

Dictionary-based Ratings of Stereotypes. To code the valence, sociability, morality, agency, and ability of the generated responses, we used the stereotype content dictionaries developed by Nicolas and colleagues (2021). These dictionaries contain a higher number of words than most other dictionary-based methods and have been tested for both reliability and validity (see Nicolas et al., 2021). To code responses, we first merged all responses for each participant into one cell. After pre-processing the responses in line with the authors' suggestions, each response was compared to the content of the sociability, morality, ability, and assertiveness dictionaries and each word was coded as to whether it matched (coded as 1) or did not match (coded as 0) any word in this dictionary, resulting in a frequency score for each category (e.g., counting how many of the words a participant generated were part of the sociability dictionary). These numbers were then used to calculate percentages, that is, the percentage of all words used by the participant that was coded into a specific dictionary. Note that the dictionaries contain words that indicate the presence as well as the absence of the construct in question. For example, both “mean” and “friendly” would be coded as “1” for sociability, and only unrelated words such as “truck” would be coded as “0”. Each response could be coded into multiple dictionaries.

The SADCAT package provided by Nicolas et al. (2021) also enabled us to code for the directionality of the responses, given that we were less interested in whether, for example, stereotypes of upper-class groups were more likely to contain words *relating* to ability, and

more interested in whether they were seen as *higher* in ability. Note that directionality is not necessarily the same as valence. For example, both “violent” and “decisive” are high in assertiveness, but one is negatively valenced and the other one is positively valenced. We subtracted the percentage of words associated with a *lack* of a specific construct (e.g., “mean” for sociability) from the percentage of words associated with the *presence* of a specific construct (e.g., “friendly” for sociability). Negative values thus indicate that the target group is stereotyped as low in sociability, morality, assertiveness, and ability, while positive values indicate that the target group is stereotyped as high in sociability, morality, assertiveness, and ability.

We used a similar approach to code the valence of stereotypes, first calculating the number of times words of positive and negative valence occurred and then subtracting the percentage of negative words from the percentage of positive words using the SADCAT package (Nicolas et al., 2021)

Results and Discussion

K-Means Clustering

Lower-Class Stereotypes. Participants listed a total of 7328 stereotypes and a total of 3092 unique responses (note that even differences in spelling such as “cut-throat” vs. “cut throat” are counted as unique). A total of 498 unique stereotypes were classified as outliers and excluded from the cluster analysis. The two quality indices suggested a solution with 430 clusters. After highly similar clusters (e.g., angry, violent, and aggressive; likes guns, gun lovers, gun toting, gun owners, gun loving, and shoot guns) were merged, the final number of clusters was 250. A list of all clusters, along with the stereotypes within these clusters, can be found at: https://osf.io/mzj2d/?view_only=b0f05dc8a146401daebe0f9be1cd0e7e.

The ten most frequently listed stereotypes for each target group are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Most Frequently listed Stereotypes for Lower-class Groups (Study 2)

Blue collar worker n _{participants} =141 n _{stereotypes} =1191	White trash n _{participants} =160 n _{stereotypes} =1421	Rednecks n _{participants} =161 n _{stereotypes} =1435	Hicks n _{participants} =156 n _{stereotypes} =1401	Hillbillies n _{participants} =156 n _{stereotypes} =1380
Hard-working (100)	Poor (96)	Dumb (75)	Uneducated (93)	Poor (82)
Tough (61)	Uneducated (59)	Uneducated (66)	Dumb (68)	Uneducated (78)
Uneducated (48)	Racist (57)	Racist (60)	Poor (64)	Dumb (73)
Poor (46)	Dirty (54)	Poor (57)	Dirty (44)	Dirty (56)
Dirty (43)	Dumb (40)	Dirty (39)	Racist (44)	Inbred (41)
Manual labor (35)	Live in trailer (30)	Republican (36)	Rural (36)	Racist (32)
Strong (32)	Trashy (28)	Conservative (35)	Redneck (31)	Rural (29)
Under educated (30)	Drug users (27)	Like guns (31)	Country (29)	Backwards (28)
Lower-class (28)	Rude (25)	Southern (27)	Unsophisticated (29)	Redneck (25)
Lazy (25)	Ignorant (25)	White (26)	Southern (24)	Ignorant (23)
Honest (25)				
Low income (25)				

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to how often the attribute was listed. When more than one stereotype was tied for 10th place, more than 10 stereotypes are listed.

The shading of the cells indicates how many groups share the stereotype. The darker the color, the higher the number of groups sharing the stereotype.

Given the substantial differences in methodology used in Studies 1 and 2 (e.g., type of analysis; number of resulting clusters/coding categories; exclusion/inclusion of different terms), the consistency of findings across them is especially notable. Again, all five lower-class groups were stereotyped as uneducated, poor, and dirty (“unkempt, dirty appearance” in Study 1) and most groups (blue collar workers being the exception) were stereotyped as dumb (“stupid” in Study 1). As in Study 1, we also saw unique stereotypes emerge for different lower-class groups.

Replicating findings from Study 1, blue collar workers were also again stereotyped as both hard-working and lazy. Manual work was also once more a common stereotype. The most notable difference to Study 1 was that in this study, physical strength and toughness, as well as honesty, were among the most common stereotypes. Other stereotypes seemed closely related to the ones already mentioned (e.g., under-educated and uneducated) and are likely merely a reflection of the methodology and higher number of clusters responses could fall into.

As in Study 1, White trash individuals were again stereotyped as racist, as living in trailers, drug users, and as rude. In this study, they were additionally stereotyped as ignorant and trashy, and no longer as loud or drinking a lot.

Rednecks were again stereotyped as politically conservative / Republican and racist. Here, they were also stereotyped as White, Southern, and liking guns, but no longer as backwards, drinking a lot, and outdoorsy hobbies. The latter omission is likely a reflection of the fact that in this study, different outdoorsy hobbies (e.g., hunting and fishing) were coded into different clusters. Indeed, the clusters “hunting”, “fishing” and “outdoorsy” taken together were listed 32 times (more than liking guns, being Southern, and being White).

Hicks were once more stereotyped as unsophisticated, rural/country, and racist. In this study, they were additionally stereotyped as Southern and as rednecks, indicating that perhaps hicks are viewed as a subgroup of rednecks – specifically rednecks that live in rural areas. The stereotype of drinking a lot and being narrow-minded no longer emerged.

Lastly, hillbillies were again stereotyped as inbred/incestuous, rural, and backwards. Like hicks, they were also stereotyped as rednecks, suggesting that redneck is a broader category than hicks or hillbillies. In this study, they were additionally stereotyped as ignorant, but no longer as being unsophisticated or as having bad teeth (although the latter was the 11th most generated stereotype with 22 mentions).

Upper-Class Stereotypes. Participants listed a total of 7034 stereotypes and a total of 3300 unique responses. A total of 552 unique responses were classified as outliers and excluded from the cluster analysis. The two quality indices suggested a solution with 470 clusters. After highly similar clusters (e.g., arrogant, smug, and cocky; management, manager, and supervisor) were merged, the final number of clusters was 294. A list of all clusters, along with the stereotypes within these clusters, can be found at:

https://osf.io/mzj2d/?view_only=b0f05dc8a146401daebe0f9be1cd0e7e.

The ten most frequently listed stereotypes per target group are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

Most Frequently listed Stereotypes for Upper-class Groups (Study 2)

White collar worker n _{participants} =162 n _{stereotypes} =1422	WASPs n _{participants} =150 n _{stereotypes} =1231	The 1% n _{participants} =150 n _{stereotypes} =1262	Trust fund babies n _{participants} =146 n _{stereotypes} =1300	Coastal elites n _{participants} =145 n _{stereotypes} =1243
Educated (62)	Rich (70)	Rich (65)	Spoiled (82)	Rich (108)
Smart (60)	Political (49)	Greedy (58)	Rich (75)	Snobby (66)
Rich (60)	Racist (40)	Selfish (49)	Entitled (73)	Political (49)
Office worker (51)	Religious (37)	Cruel (37)	Lazy (62)	Educated (43)
Well-dressed (34)	Educated (27)	Dishonest (36)	Arrogant (38)	Out of touch (30)
Professional (29)	Upper-class (27)	Powerful (29)	Privileged (35)	Arrogant (29)
Hard working (29)	Traditional (25)	Snobby (26)	Snobby (34)	Old money (26)
Manager (25)	Privileged (24)	Arrogant (25)	Dumb (34)	White (22)
High status (24)	Snobby (23)	Old money (23)	Selfish (30)	Rude (21)
Upper-class (22)	Old money (22)	Entitled (23)	No work ethic (29)	Selfish (19)
		Out of touch (23)		

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to how often the attribute was listed. When more than one stereotype was tied for 10th place, more than 10 stereotypes are listed.

The shading of the cells indicates how many groups share the stereotype. The darker the color, the higher the number of groups sharing the stereotype.

For upper-class stereotypes we also found some consistency across groups and across studies. As in Study 1, all upper-class groups were stereotyped as rich and all groups except for white collar workers were stereotyped as snobby and/or arrogant.

Additionally, white collar workers were again stereotyped as educated, smart/intelligent, as having high status jobs (Study 1: High status job; Study 2: Manager; office worker), and as being powerful/high status. In this study, professional, upper-class, and well-dressed emerged as additional stereotypes, whereas career-focused, privileged, and untrustworthy were not among the top 10 stereotypes.

WASPs were again stereotyped as religious, racist, and privileged. The second most common stereotype listed was “political.” It is important to note that this cluster included both “liberal” and “conservative” and thus it is somewhat unclear what this stereotype means. Unfortunately, clusters with words opposite in meaning are common when using word embeddings as terms such as “conservative” and “liberal” tend to appear in similar contexts. Given that in Study 1, WASPs were stereotyped as politically conservative, it seems likely

that this is also what participants thought of here. Stereotypes that emerged here but not in Study 1 were traditional, upper-class, and old money, while boring, cold, and narrow-minded from Study 1 were not among the ten most frequently listed stereotypes.

As in Study 1, the 1% were again stereotyped as greedy, self-centered/selfish, out of touch, dishonest/untrustworthy, and powerful. Here, but not in Study 1, cruel, old money, entitled, and out of touch were also among the top ten stereotypes, while narrow-minded, racist, privileged, and materialistic were not.

Trust fund babies were once more stereotyped as spoiled, entitled, privileged, and as lazy / having no work ethic. Unlike in Study 1, they were stereotyped as dumb and selfish, but not as carefree, out of touch, having a luxurious lifestyle, greedy, or untrustworthy. Some of this may again be the result of the difference in number of clusters. For example, while we coded “expensive cars” and “lives in nice house” as “luxurious lifestyle” in Study 1, here there were several different clusters with similar themes, for example “expensive cars”, “lavish lifestyle”, “travels internationally”, and “yacht owners”, meaning that responses were distributed across these categories and thus less likely to reach the top 10.

Lastly, coastal elites were again stereotyped as educated, rude, and political (likely politically liberal). In this study, the stereotypes also included being out of touch, White, selfish, and having old money, but being powerful, having a luxurious lifestyle, a high status job, being privileged, spoiled, and intelligent were not part of the top ten listed stereotypes.

Dictionary-Based Results

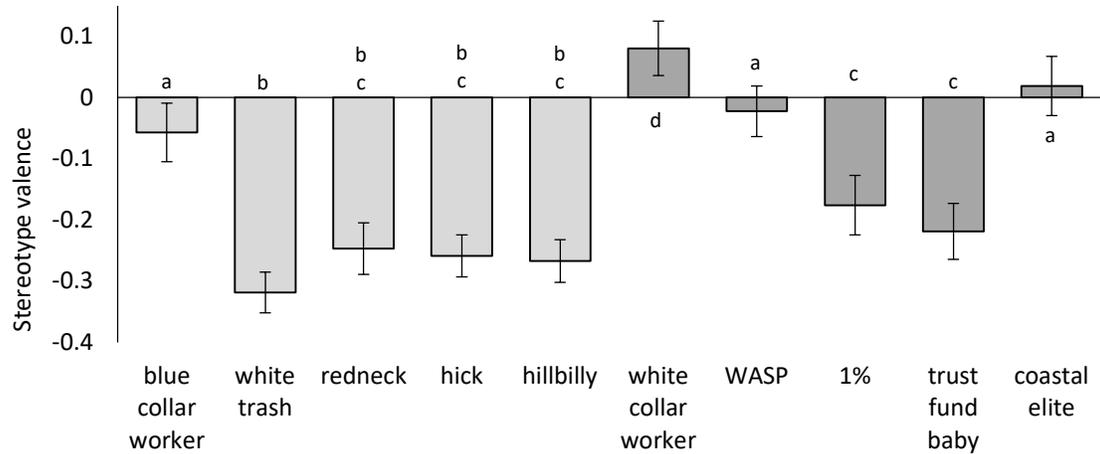
Do stereotypes differ between groups of the same social class? We first tested whether stereotypes of different lower-class groups and upper-class groups differed in valence, morality, sociability, ability, and assertiveness (H1). In other words, is there variability within each class? We used a series of one-way ANOVAs with target group as the independent variable and stereotype valence, sociability, morality, ability, and assertiveness

as the dependent variables respectively. Results are illustrated in Figures 4-8. Note that because values and value ranges differ considerably between measures, the y-axis is adjusted to only display the range that contains data.

For exploratory purposes, we also examined whether these results were moderated by participants' social class, but did not find a significant interaction for any of the measures (p values ranging from .060 to .889), suggesting that these stereotypes are widely known and not specific to members of one social class, which is perhaps unsurprising given that we asked about stereotypes held by US society, not those endorsed by participants.

Stereotype valence differed by target group, $F(9, 1517) = 43.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$. This included variation within each social class, in line with H1. More specifically, the stereotypes of white trash, hillbillies, hicks, and rednecks were most negative and did not differ from each other. Trust fund babies and the 1% were also stereotyped fairly negatively and did not differ from any rednecks, hicks, and hillbillies. Blue collar workers, coastal elites, and WASPs were stereotyped similarly in valence and their stereotypes were fairly neutral. White collar workers were stereotyped slightly positively – their stereotypes were more positive than all other groups except coastal elites. These patterns partially replicate those in Study 1 but show some differences. Similar to Study 1, stereotypes were largely negative and white collar workers, blue collar workers, and coastal elites were the most positively stereotyped groups. However, the stereotypes of WASPs and blue collar workers were similarly in valence, whereas in Study 1, WASPs were stereotyped more negatively than blue collar workers. Additionally, the stereotypes of White trash were more negative than any of the upper-class groups, which was not the case in Study 1.

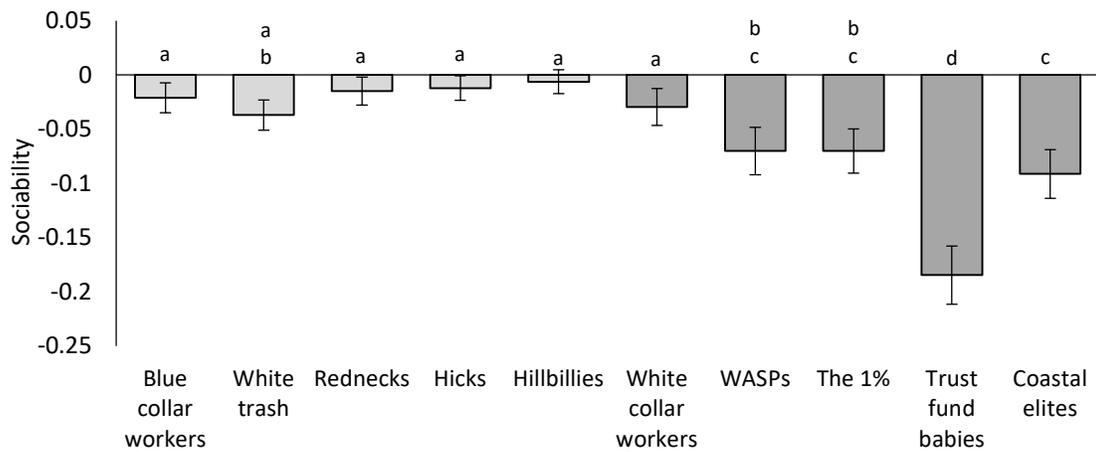
Figure 4
Stereotype valence across groups (Study 2)



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

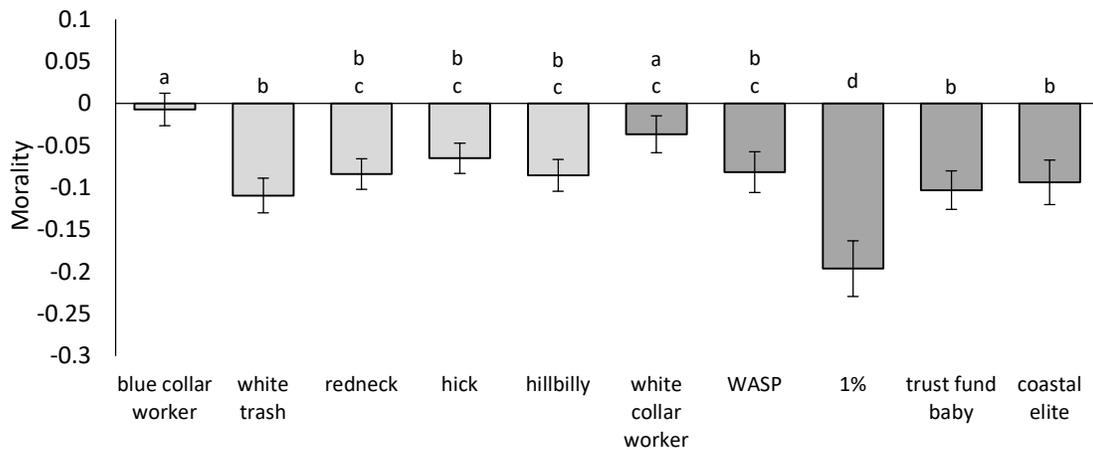
Sociability also differed by target group, $F(9, 1517) = 35.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$. As can be seen in Figure 5, trust fund babies were described as lowest in sociability – lower than all other groups. This was followed by coastal elites, WASPs, and the 1% who were all stereotyped as equally sociable. The latter two also did not differ from White trash. White collar workers and all lower-class groups did not differ in sociability. Thus, for sociability, H1 was supported for upper-class groups but not lower-class groups. Overall, all groups were stereotyped as relatively low in sociability – stereotypes were below 0 for all groups except hicks and hillbillies.

Figure 5
Sociability across groups (Study 2)



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Figure 6
Morality across groups (Study 2)



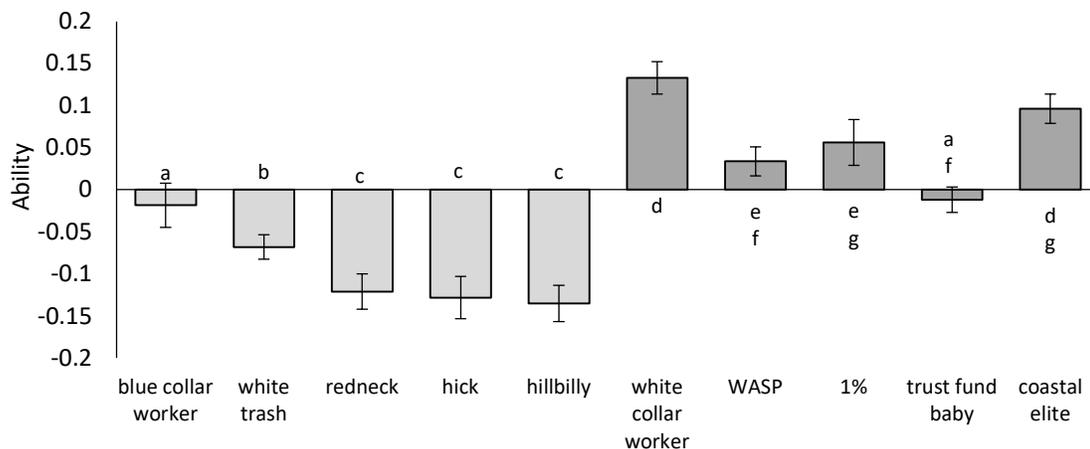
Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Morality also differed by target group, $F(9, 1517) = 18.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$, and supported H1. The 1% were stereotyped as less moral than all other groups. Most other groups (White trash, trust fund babies, coastal elites, hillbillies, rednecks, WASPs, and hicks) were stereotyped as similarly amoral. Blue collar workers were stereotyped as least amoral

and only white collar workers were stereotyped as similar to them in terms of morality. None of the values were above 0 (see Figure 6).

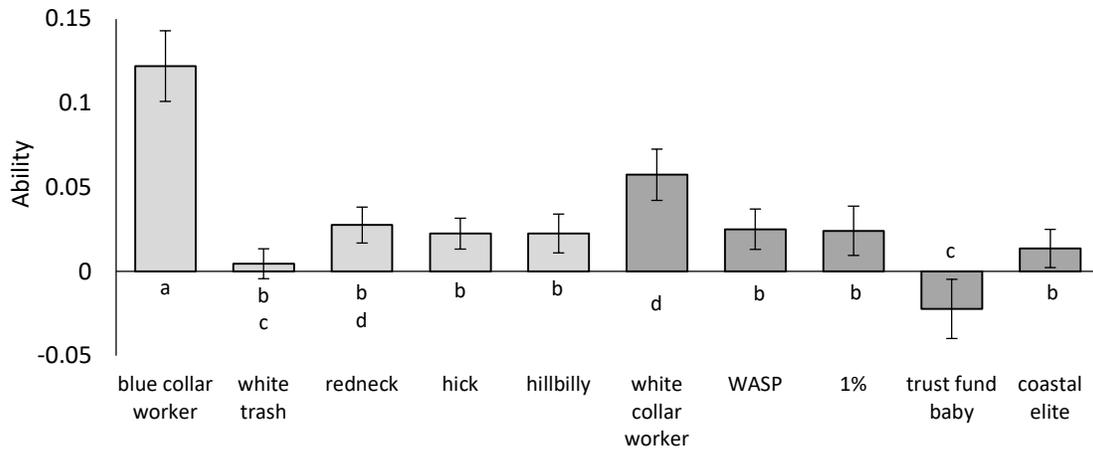
There was also an effect of target group on ability, $F(9, 1517) = 84.18, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$, and supported H1. Hillbillies, hicks, and rednecks were stereotyped as lowest in ability and did not differ from each other, followed by White trash. Values for all of these groups were negative (see Figure 7). Blue collar workers and trust fund babies were stereotyped as similar to each other and as fairly neutral in terms of ability. Trust fund babies did not differ from WASPs, who in turn did not differ from the 1%, who were stereotyped similar to coastal elites. White collar workers and coastal elites were stereotyped as highest in ability.

Figure 7
Ability across groups (Study 2)



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Figure 8
Assertiveness across groups (Study 2)



Note. Error bars refer to 95% confidence intervals. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different from each other based on Tukey post-hoc tests.

Lastly, we also found an effect of target group on assertiveness, $F(9, 1517) = 29.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, and supported H1. Trust fund babies and White trash were stereotyped as least assertive. As can be seen in Figure 8, most groups did not differ in their assertiveness, but white collar workers and rednecks were stereotyped as somewhat more assertive, and blue collar workers were stereotyped as more assertive than all other groups.

Do lower-class and upper-class stereotypes differ? Next, we tested whether, overall, lower-class groups and upper-class groups differed (H2) such that lower-class groups were stereotyped as lower in ability (H2a) and upper-class groups were stereotyped as lower in sociability (H2b). For exploratory purposes, we also tested whether they differed in stereotype valence, morality, and assertiveness. We used the mixed model approach outlined in Judd and colleagues (2012) to examine these questions, with target social class (lower-class vs. upper-class) as fixed factor and target group (blue collar worker vs. White trash vs. redneck vs. hick vs. hillbilly vs. white collar worker vs. WASP vs. 1% vs. trust fund baby vs. coastal elite) as random factor. In line with H2a and H2b, lower-class groups ($M = -.10$, SD

=.14) were stereotyped as lower in ability than upper-class groups ($M = .06$, $SD = .13$), $t(7.99) = -4.65$, $p = .002$, $d = 1.18$, and upper-class groups ($M = -.09$, $SD = .14$) were stereotyped as lower in sociability than lower-class groups ($M = -.02$, $SD = .08$), $t(7.99) = 2.69$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.61$. There were no differences for the other variables (p ranging from .052 to .434) and additional exploratory analyses showed that participant social class did not interact with target social class (p ranging from .053 to .770).

General Discussion

Across two studies, we examine the spontaneously generated stereotypes of different lower-class and upper-class White groups in the United States. US American participants listed a wide range of stereotypes, the majority of which were negative. Across both studies, all lower-class groups were stereotyped as poor, uneducated, and dirty, while upper-class groups tended to be stereotyped as rich and arrogant. Additionally, lower-class groups as a whole were stereotyped as lower in ability, while upper-class groups were stereotyped as lower in sociability. Importantly, however, we also found many differences between lower-class and upper-class groups, highlighting the importance of going beyond a simple comparison of “the rich” and “the poor.”

The combination of shared and unique stereotypes across groups of the same social class fits well with the literature on subgrouping. Subgrouping refers to the organization of information about individuals from one larger group (e.g., lower-class people) into different categories based on perceptions of similarity and difference (see Richards & Hewstone, 2001). Unlike *subtyping*, where individuals who disconfirm group stereotypes are excluded from the larger category to keep the original stereotype intact, subgrouping can lead to categories that all exhibit the same stereotype but in different ways. In our case, lower-class groups were all stereotyped as low in ability, but the exact nature in which this lack of ability was expressed differed. For example, White trash and hillbillies were stereotyped as ignorant

and hicks as unsophisticated. Upper-class groups were all stereotyped as low in sociability, but the stereotypes through which this lack of sociability was expressed differed. For example, the 1% were stereotyped as cruel and coastal elites as rude.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Social class stereotypes have received relatively little attention. We contribute to this literature and show that perceptions of upper-class groups and lower-class groups are by no means monolithic. They vary in stereotype content and valence as well as in their perceived status and attitudes towards the groups. Previous research that largely used broader labels (Durante et al., 2017) or only focused on one specific group (e.g., White trash; Loughnan et al., 2014) has not been able to uncover these nuances that might have important implications. For example, hillbillies were described as incestuous, which constitutes a strong violation of moral proscriptions and is likely to influence intergroup behavior towards this group specifically. Our nuanced findings add to the understanding of perceptions of and attitudes towards lower-class White groups, which is particularly important given their role in recent political events in the United States, most notably the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Walley, 2017).

We also add to the literature on spontaneous stereotypes. Nicolas and colleagues (2022) recently argued that many of the methods often employed in stereotyping research, such as giving participants a list of attributes and asking them to what extent these attributes apply to a group, overlooks important nuances. In other words, if you only ask participants about warmth and competence, you will only find differences in perceived warmth and competence. Indeed, employing open-response techniques, Nicolas et al. (2022) discovered additional important dimensions that people often rely on when stereotyping other groups, for example appearance and deviance. Our work echoes these arguments: While stereotypes related to (lack of) warmth and (lack of) competence were certainly listed, many of the listed

stereotypes (e.g., Southern; dirty; well-dressed; religious) do not clearly fall within either dimension.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In this study, we focused on White groups specifically to avoid the conflation of race and social class. This is particularly relevant in the context of lower status groups, where it is unclear whether previous findings really reflect social class stereotypes or racial stereotypes. This focus, however, means that our findings are by definition limited to White groups. Thus, while this study is a useful first step, future research should directly compare stereotypes of lower-class and upper-class groups with different racial backgrounds.

Additionally, while we used a bottom-up approach when selecting lower-class and upper-class groups, the decision of which groups to include was somewhat subjective. When selecting the groups from our pilot study, we excluded any groups that were mentioned for both upper and lower-class groups (e.g. racists) and those that were gendered (e.g., tech bro and soccer mom). However, these may be important upper and lower-class groups to study and excluding them necessarily limited who was represented in our findings. Indeed, given the literature on androcentric prototypes (Ghavami & Peplau, 2010), we likely overlooked stereotypes associated with upper-class and lower-class women. Future research should examine the gendered nature of these stereotypes and explicitly focus on stereotypes of women of different social classes.

Similarly, future research could expand on this work and include stereotypes of working-class and middle-class groups, although it could be argued that some of the groups included here (specifically blue collar workers and white collar workers) fall under these umbrellas. The stereotypes listed in this study were largely negative. This could be a reflection of the fact that we chose to focus on groups at the top and bottom of the social class hierarchy and that working class and middle-class stereotypes are more positive. The

negativity could reflect outgroup bias as we deliberately recruited middle class participants. Thus, there are many open questions and we are excited for future work to explore them.

It is also worth acknowledging that these stereotypes may be culturally specific to the United States. Indeed, terms such as “hillbillies” or “coastal elites” are unlikely to be used in other cultures and thus very different stereotypes may emerge. However, despite these differences in terms, we would expect some consistency of the stereotypes associated with such groups. For example, “White trash” elicits similar forms of stereotyping and dehumanization as the terms “chav” in the United Kingdom and “bogan” in Australia (Loughnan et al., 2014). Future research should explore this question more fully and examine the intersection of race and social class in contexts outside of the United States.

Beyond limitations in the groups we chose, our samples were also limited to White people in the United States. Future research should examine whether stereotypes about White people differ between participants from different racial groups. On the one hand, stereotypes are often culturally shared. On the other hand, it may be that minoritized racial groups hold more negative stereotypes about White people than White people themselves do.

Lastly, it is worth noting that we asked about societal stereotypes rather than the stereotypes participants hold themselves. While this is common practice in the stereotyping literature (e.g. Fiske et al., 2002; Ghavami & Peplau, 2010; Nicolas et al., 2022) and avoids proscriptions against negative stereotyping, it likely resulted in more negative stereotypes (e.g., Howansky et al., 2021) and may have contributed to the null findings regarding participants’ social class.

Conclusion

Economic inequality in the United States is increasing, leading to a stronger reliance on social class stereotypes. We provide a rich picture of the stereotypes of lower-class White groups and upper-class White groups in the United States. We found evidence for stereotype

consistency across lower-class groups and upper-class groups but at the same time, many differences emerged. We conclude that social class stereotypes are not monolithic and that researchers should attend to the nuanced pictures associated with different groups within the same social class.

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