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Who Feels They Contribute to U.S. Society? Helping Behaviors and Social Class Disparities in Perceived Contributions

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Americans in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts are less likely to believe they contribute to society. Helping others by giving one's time is an important way of contributing to others that also varies with social class. Five studies (N = 7,326) investigated whether one source of the social class disparity in perceived contributions is a default model that considers helping distant others (i.e., *bridging help*, e.g., volunteering) as more of a contribution than helping close others (i.e., *bonding help*, e.g., caring for family members). In Study 1, Americans in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts perceived they contribute less to society (i.e., self-perceived contributions, Part A) and believed others perceive them as contributing less (i.e., metaperceived contributions, Part B). Studies 2–4 provide evidence for a default model of social good: Americans across social class contexts and even helpers themselves perceived bridging help as more of a contribution than bonding help, in part, because bridging help is perceived as reflecting more choice to help. With a representative sample (Midlife Development in the United States), Study 5 finds that Americans in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts engaged in relatively less bridging help and more bonding help. However, bridging help served as a stronger pathway to feelings of contributing than bonding help did. Together, these studies suggest that people in lower social class contexts may experience a *psychological* inequality, in part, because some of the forms of help that are most accessible, familiar, and practiced are widely perceived as less of a contribution.

Keywords: social class, contribution, prosocial behavior, culture, status

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> I cannot think of anything I did that would make the world a better place.

> I have not [contributed in the past week]. I took care of my kids driving them and feeding them and getting them to where they need.

In these recent quotes, two survey participants in lower social class contexts claim they had not contributed to the world. Given the well-documented importance of believing one's endeavors in life have meaning and provide value, this is a concerning belief (Anderson et al., 2015). Earlier research suggests that such sentiments are not uncommon, particularly among U.S. Americans in working-class contexts (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004). One of the participants in the opening quotes provided needed care for others but did not count this effort as a contribution. Why? Extending the literatures on prosociality and social support, the current studies explore this question by investigating what forms of help to others are considered worthy of societal recognition as a contribution and what types of actions are denied such status. The question of who believes they contribute to U.S. society and why they believe this has not yet been fully examined, and beginning to answer it can add to the understanding of why so many Americans feel they do not belong (Over Zero & American Immigration Council, 2024).

Specifically, we investigate the social class disparity in the sense that one contributes something meaningful to society. Because one significant way in which people contribute to society is through

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helping others, we contrast two common forms: helping strangers, such as volunteering, versus helping close others, such as caring for family. The current set of studies finds that one of these ways of helping is perceived as more of a contribution to society, which likely has implications for social class inequality. We ask three specific questions: (1) Do Americans who are currently in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts continue to report reduced self-perceived contribution, and does this disparity extend to metaperceptions (i.e., how people think *others* evaluate their contributions)? (2) Is help to more distant and unknown others perceived as more of a contribution to society than help to close and known others? (3) Do differences in forms of help to distant and close others relate to the social class disparity in self-perceived contribution?

Research on prosocial behavior and social support has examined motivations to help, when and why people help, who is most likely to help, what types of help should be counted as most altruistic, and the effects of giving and receiving support (e.g., Aknin et al., 2011, 2020; Cialdini et al., 1997; Courbalay et al., 2015; Darley & Batson, 1973; Dawkins, 1976; Dunn et al., 2008; Thoits, 1995). Prior research on social class has investigated who gives proportionally more to others and the relationship between social class, generosity, and (un)ethical behavior (e.g., Korndörfer et al., 2015; Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Piff et al., 2010, 2012; Piff & Robinson, 2017). Here, we extend these literatures and their implications for social class inequality by focusing on a new and important set of questions: What types of helping behaviors are perceived as contributing to society, who is afforded the opportunity to feel like they contribute, and what is one potential source of this disparity?

Perceived Contribution and Social Class

Perceived social contribution reflects "whether, and to what degree, people feel that whatever they do in the world is valued by society and contributes to the commonweal" (Keyes, 1998, p. 122). Importantly, it reflects both the belief that one is contributing and the perception that those contributions are valued by others.[1] A long-theorized element of social well-being and a meaningful life (e.g., Erikson, 1958), believing that one's efforts are valuable and contribute to society is demonstrably important for physical, mental, and social health (Anderson et al., 2015; Frankl, 1959; Ryff, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2003). As just one example, people who believe they contribute report better psychological well-being when experiencing chronic pain and are more likely to live longer (Gruenewald et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2020).

In addition to disparities in health and well-being, Americans in less materially resourced contexts face an additional burden—the psychological inequality of believing that one's efforts contribute less to the larger whole (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Hochschild, 2016; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004; Lamont, 2019; Mutz, 2018; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). Americans in lower social class contexts, on average, report lower self-perceived social contribution than Americans in higher social class contexts (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004).[2] This social class disparity has been reported in previous research conducted over 20 years ago, but it has not been further investigated. While it is theorized that social contribution relies on the belief that other people value one's contributions, these metaperceptions and any potential social class disparity that may characterize them have not been empirically assessed. We investigate this social class disparity in self-perceived contributions first by asking if the disparity is enduring and continues to persist today, employing multiple methods for a more comprehensive understanding, and by assessing if the disparity extends to how people believe others perceive them (i.e., metaperceived social contribution).

> *Research Question 1:* Do Americans in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts continue to report reduced self-perceived social contribution and does this disparity extend to metaperceived social contribution?

Helping Others: Bridging Versus Bonding Help

Helping others is one important way that people can feel that they contribute to society. To probe what might account for the social class disparity in perceived contribution, we investigated how different forms of help are valued as worthy contributions. Helping others takes many forms, so categorizing helping behaviors is a complex task with many ways of doing so. Our focus is on helping that involves giving one's *time* to aid another person. For a useful organizing framework, we draw on social capital theory which makes a distinction between connections among individuals *within* one's network and connections with people *outside* one's social network (Putnam, 2000). We designate *bridging help* as helping by giving time outside one's immediate social network (i.e., when there are no direct network connections) and operationalize it as giving time to nonfamily distant others (e.g., volunteering to help strangers). This type of help is most often voluntary and freely chosen and includes the 8.8 billion hours that Americans volunteer annually (National Center for Charitable Statistics Project Team, 2020).

In contrast, we designate *bonding help* as helping by giving time within one's immediate social network to a direct network connection and operationalize it as giving time to close others such as family members (e.g., providing unpaid assistance to close others). This help more often reflects duty, responsibility, obligation, commitment, and need, and it includes the 53 million Americans, or 20% of American adults, caring for another adult (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020). The vast majority (89%) of this care is for relatives, including parents, in-laws, spouses, siblings, etc. Given the legal obligations that parents have to their nonadult children, we excluded this type of care from this initial investigation. Our approach aligns with existing conceptualizations of family caregiving that describes this labor as giving unpaid assistance to another adult to "help them take care of themselves" (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020, p. 1). This help includes many forms, such as aiding with activities of daily living, assisting with medical tasks, and coordinating outside care, and often involves caring for an older individual or someone with health conditions that require additional assistance (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020; Reinhard et al., 2023). The one in five American adults caring for

[1] Assessing one's contribution to others is a nuanced and dimensional construct. It is most commonly assessed by asking about self-perceived contributions to society, the world, and one's community. Here, we investigated the broader construct of contributing more generally and often refer to contributing to society to reference this broader construct.

[2] We found that educational attainment, the most commonly used marker of social class context, was the strongest predictor of self-perceived contribution compared to age, gender, race, marital status, and working status, so we focused our investigation on this social class disparity. See Supplemental Material for more information.

another adult engage in such high volumes of care that economists have estimated that if such labor were paid, it would be valued at nearly $470 billion each year (Reinhard et al., 2019). Unpaid caregiving serves as a crucial social safety net within the United States where government aid is often stigmatized as a source of laziness and dependence (Barczyk & Kredler, 2018; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Thomas et al., 2023).

What Is Valued More as a Contribution to Society: Bridging or Bonding Help?

We hypothesized that bridging help would be valued as *more* of a contribution to society than bonding help. Across Western social science disciplines, helping strangers is perceived as more altruistic than helping family or close others (Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Hume, 1740/1896; Kohlberg et al., 1983; Nagel, 1970). While morality has many dimensions relevant both to helping strangers and family, people who help strangers are generally perceived as more morally good than people who help close others (McManus et al., 2020; notably, this is not the case when someone declines helping a family member to instead help a stranger, which is perceived as a moral violation). The emphasis on distant others reflects assumptions that "true altruism" is the motivation to help others out of a "selfless" concern for their welfare (Batson, 1991; Cialdini et al., 1997; Neuberg et al., 1997). Helping distant others reflects and promotes the individualistic American emphasis on expressing one's volition through free choice (Bellah et al., 1985; Foner, 1999). One does not need to and is not obligated to help strangers but may still choose to (McManus et al., 2020). In the U.S. cultural context, the freedom to choose serves as a powerful psychological force and is related to many positive outcomes (e.g., Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Madan et al., 2020). In particular, choice can serve as an important way of demonstrating one's motivation and preferences (Kitayama et al., 2004; Madan et al., 2020; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Markus & Schwartz, 2010). Thus, choosing to help strangers can signal acting on one's volition and demonstrating one's authentic motivation to help (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Miyamoto et al., 2018; Savani et al., 2008, 2010; Stephens et al., 2007).[3]

In contrast, we hypothesized bonding help is typically valued as *less* of a contribution to society in the United States than bridging help. Bonding help centers the person-in-relationship responding to others' needs and is usually cast as obligatory (Bellah et al., 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; McManus et al., 2020). People are widely assumed to have a *special obligation* to help their relatives (Jeske, 1998; Sommers, 1986), and those who fail to do so or neglect to help kin are usually considered less moral and trustworthy than those who neglect to help a stranger (McManus et al., 2020). Yet, in contrast to the freedom associated with choosing to help, fulfilling one's obligations and commitments while sometimes necessary is often considered a constraint on freedom and choice. Helping close others can be perceived as selfish because the helper may more readily be viewed as personally benefiting from the help they provide (Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Cialdini et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1993). Some scholars suggest that helping family members is inherently based in self-interest because it promotes the continuation of one's own genes (Dawkins, 1976; Hamilton, 1964), and more broadly, some have argued that a personal relationship with the person receiving help entangles selfless and selfish motives to such an extent that it calls into the question the altruistic nature of the action (Cialdini et al., 1997; Neuberg et al., 1997). Thus, being obligated to help close others is assumed to reflect unknown, or even selfish, motivations to help and as a result may be considered as less of a contribution to society.[4]

> *Research Question 2:* Is bridging help perceived as more of a contribution to society than bonding help?

We propose that the hypothesis that bridging help is perceived as a more worthy contribution to society than bonding help in the United States reflects a *default model of social good*. This proposed model is a historically derived, foundational yet implicit, taken-for-granted understanding of the right or moral way to contribute to others and the social good (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Markus et al., in press; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008; Quinn, 2005). Default models are collectively constructed and widely shared assumptions about what is right, valuable, or moral in a given domain within a given context (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Effron et al., 2018; Markus, 2016; Markus et al., 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Plaut et al., 2002; Shore, 2012). Typically, people are unaware that they or others endorse these default models, that they are socially transmitted or inscribed in the practices of a given context, yet people may suffer when they cannot meet the standards set by the model (Kitayama et al., 2010; Ridgeway, 2019; Stephens et al., 2012).[5]

[3] The value that we hypothesize is attributed to bridging help likely reflects deeply entrenched Western ontological assumptions and religious traditions that privilege the separate individual over the person-in-relationship as the foundational social reality (Bellah et al., 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Nisbett, 2003; Shweder & LeVine, 1984). The powerful associations among independence, morality, and choice prevalent in the West are not natural or inevitable, however. For analysis of contexts where helping and giving to family members and close others is a duty that takes on a particular moral significance and is not a matter of personal choice, see, for example, Gelfand and Kashima (2016), Miller et al. (1990, 2011), Miyamoto et al. (2018), Shweder et al. (1997), and Shweder and LeVine (1984).

[4] Some work on social support has found that giving instrumental support to close others, a form of bonding help, is associated with psychological benefits for the helper (Brown et al., 2003; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017). Yet, scholars have theorized that the psychological benefits of giving social support are likely only present when help is freely given (Inagaki & Orehek, 2017; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). As one such example, chronic caregivers provide a great deal of support but are often at a higher risk of experiencing stress and reduced health and well-being (Adelman et al., 2014). Thus, there are conditions under which providing bonding help is beneficial for the helper, but these instances often involve choice, which may be less likely to characterize a great deal of bonding help.

[5] Shared, implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions have been described and labeled in multiple ways in the social science literature—as legitimizing myths, defaults, ideological biases, cultural schemas, cultural models, and normative understandings. These concepts overlap in meaning in that they reference a status quo, usual, *default* understanding. They index ideas that are assumed to be believed by many members (not all) of a given cultural context or community and, more than many normative perceptions, to carry a sense of what is good, right, normal, or legitimate within a given cultural context and to exert some sanctioning or coercive force on behavior. We have not used the term *cultural model* here to signal that we are not explicitly comparing Western versus East or South Asian contexts as in previous work. This default model of the social good could be seen as a legitimizing myth (O'Brien & Major, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), and perhaps will in future work, but current empirical work does not yet fully support that idea.

Bridging and Bonding Help and Social Class

Ways of helping reflect the circumstances, situations, affordances, and constraints of people's lives. As a result, forms of help can vary with social class (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Bridging help comes in different forms and is practiced across the social class spectrum. However, social class is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of volunteerism: Americans with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in formal volunteering, most often to unknown or more distant others (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Rossi, 2001b; Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Americans in higher social class contexts are more likely to volunteer than Americans in lower social class contexts for multiple reasons, including generally having more resources, including more free time and better health, belonging to wider social networks that garner more opportunities and requests to volunteer, and social norms that make volunteering more accessible in these contexts (Brady et al., 1999; Egerton & Mullan, 2008; Son & Wilson, 2012; Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Very importantly, people in higher (vs. lower) social class contexts are relatively less likely to have family and close others with significant unmet needs that require their direct help, leaving additional resources available to give outside one's immediate social network (Cao et al., 2021; Rossi, 2001a).

Bonding help also comes in many forms, and people across the social class spectrum are doing a great deal of bonding help. However, adult family caregiving is disproportionately more practiced among the 65% of Americans with relatively less wealth and education (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020; Rossi, 2001b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In contrast to the abundance of material resources common in higher social class contexts, relatively underresourced lower social class contexts with prevalent social class health disparities often require greater amounts of help to meet the needs of close others in these contexts (Adler et al., 1994; Bruhn & Rebach, 2014; Pearlin et al., 2005). Many people in lower social class contexts cannot afford to outsource care for adult family members and are less likely to have additional help from others, either paid or unpaid, increasing the caregiving need (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020; Bookman & Kimbrel, 2011; Bruhn & Rebach, 2014; Stommel et al., 1994). Lastly, the social networks of people in these contexts are primarily comprised of close others and held together by norms of support and reciprocity, such as relying on extended family and neighbors for rides, help with childcare, and providing small loans in emergencies (Carey & Markus, 2017; Markus & Conner, 2013; Melamed & Simpson, 2016; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Offer et al., 2010).

Given that past work suggests distinct constraints and affordances within higher and lower social class contexts that afford somewhat differing ways of helping others, then a default model of social good that prioritizes bridging help to distant others potentially has implications for social class inequality.

> *Research Question 3:* Do differences in forms of bridging help and bonding help relate to the social class disparity in self-perceived contribution?

The Current Research

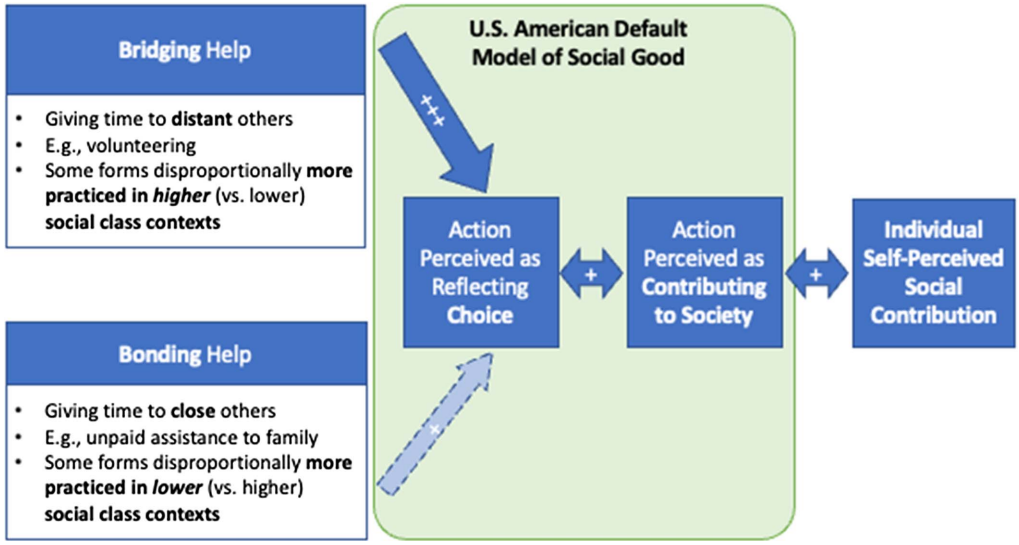
Five studies that leverage diverse methods examine the social class disparity in perceived contribution to society by investigating what efforts on behalf of others are seen as worthy of being valued as a contribution. Study 1 used survey questions and open-ended measures to test if the social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution (Part A; $N = 1{,}250$) reported in earlier research persists today and if it is also reflected in metaperceived social contribution (Part B; $N = 1{,}052$; Hypothesis 1; Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004). To examine a possible source of this disparity, two experiments and a correlational study probed for the presence of a default model of social good. Study 2 ($N = 282$) tested if Americans across the social class spectrum endorse the view that bridging help is more of a contribution than bonding help (Hypothesis 2). Study 3 ($N = 502$) leveraged a manipulate-the-mediator design to experimentally test the role of the choice to help in perceptions of that help as a contribution to society. Finally, Study 4 ($N = 1{,}239$) assessed the default model among helpers to investigate if people doing the help themselves perceive bonding help to be less of a contribution to society than bridging help. Lastly, Study 5 ($N = 3{,}001$) used three waves of the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) data set to test if different ways of helping partially explain the social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution (Hypothesis 3). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the conceptual model linking ways of helping others, the default model of social good, and feelings of contribution.

Study 1A: Social Class Disparity in Self-Perceived Contribution

Study 1 leveraged two large-scale correlational studies (Study 1A and Study 1B) to investigate how Americans perceive their contributions to society. Keyes (1998) first reported that people with less education reported lower levels of self-perceived social contribution, but this disparity has not yet been explored systematically. Studies 1A and 1B extended these original findings in three ways. First, they tested if the social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution persists today. Second, Studies 1A and 1B employed both closed- and open-ended measures to assess the disparity in self-perceived social contribution for a more comprehensive understanding of it. Using open-ended prompts allowed us to start with people's experiences in their own words, in addition to using a validated closed-ended measure, when probing the social class disparity in believing one's efforts contribute to the larger whole. Third, Study 1B investigated whether the social class disparity in self-perceived social contributions extends to how Americans think other people perceive their contributions (i.e., *metaperceived* social contribution). Given that social class inequality and stratification have only increased since Keyes' original reporting, we expected the social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution to continue to be evident in both closed- and open-ended measures. Further, people in lower social class contexts, on average, believe others perceive them more negatively than their higher social class counterparts, and people sometimes use judgments about self-perceptions when evaluating how others' perceive them (Elsaadawy et al., 2023; Engstrom et al., 2023; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Thus, we expected to find evidence of a social class disparity in both self-perceived and metaperceived social contributions.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model Guiding the Investigation of Social Class Disparities in Self-Perceived Contribution to Society



Note. This is a schematic rendering of the general conceptual model put forth in the current article. Some forms of bridging help are relatively more practiced by people in higher (vs. lower) social class contexts. Bridging (vs. bonding) help is perceived as reflecting more choice to help and as more of a contribution to society, which is positively and strongly related to self-perceived social contribution. In contrast, some forms of bonding help are relatively more practiced by people in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts. Bonding (vs. bridging) help is perceived as reflecting less choice to help, as less of a contribution to society, and is less related to a sense of self-perceived social contribution. The five studies presented here test different parts of this model. Text has been bolded for emphasis and italicized to distinguish important comparisons. "+++" within a solid arrow represents a very strong, positive association. "+" within a dotted arrow represents a weak, positive association or no association. "+" within a solid arrow represents a positive accociation. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method

Participants

Adults living in the United States were recruited via Dynata, a participant recruitment service. We aimed to roughly balance the sample by social class context (high-school degree or less education, college degree or more education), gender (men, women), and geographic region (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) for a total of 16 sampling cells. To have at least 75 participants per cell, we aimed to recruit a minimum of 1,200 participants. We excluded participants who wrote gibberish for half or more of the open-ended questions as a measure of quality control and restricted the sample to data collected prior to March 2020 to eliminate the confound introduced by the onset of COVID-19 in the United States. We present the quantitative analyses using the reduced sample (excluding data collected prior to March 2020). Quantitative results are consistent when analyzing the full sample, which are shown in the Supplemental Material. The final sample included N = 1,250 participants. The sample was 64.40% participants with college degrees or more education, 55.60% women, and 76.72% White (M_{age} = 52.15 years, SD_{age} = 16.27 years; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics). A post hoc power analysis reveals that Study 1A is approximately 99% powered to detect a medium effect (Cohen's d = .632) for the key analysis of a social class difference in the self-perceived social contribution scale. Stanford University's Institutional Review Board approved Studies 1–4 before data collection (protocol: 53892).

Measures

Participants completed an online survey that included a measure of self-perceived social contribution, an open-ended question about their contributions, and demographic questions.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution Scale. Self-perceived social contribution was assessed using the social contribution subscale of the social well-being scale (Keyes, 1998). The scale is the mean of three items: "I have something valuable to give to the world," "My daily activities do not create anything worthwhile for my community" (reverse scored), and "I have nothing important to contribute to society" (reverse scored). Items were measured from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* (M = 4.77, SD = 1.34, α = .67).

Open-Ended Responses to Actions Counted as Contributions. Participants responded to the open-ended question:

> Contributions are actions that you choose to do, you hope benefit others or the world, and reflect your goals. Think about your actions over the past week. Take into account all that you do, in terms of time, money, concern, on your job, and for your family, friends, and the community. List any and all actions that you hope contribute to making the world a better place.

The prompt drew on language from prior work to capture a holistic approach to contributions in which participants could report on a variety of domains (Fleeson, 2001). Two research assistants coded the open-ended responses on the dimensions described below (see Supplemental Material for additional details on coding procedure and reliability).[6]

No Contribution. The coders indicated if participants stated they had not made a contribution.

Number of Actions as Contributions. The coders indicated the number of separate contributions the participant listed.

Social Class Context. Social classes are cultural contexts that vary in objective markers of status, such as educational attainment, wealth and income, occupational status, and material resources as well as in values, ways of living in the world, and patterns of self-construal (Carey & Markus, 2017; Cohen & Varnum, 2016; Fiske, 2011; Kraus et al., 2011, 2019; Lamont, 2000; Markus & Conner, 2013; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2012; Williams, 2017). Here, we index social class context using educational attainment, as it is one of the most commonly used measures of social class and is a strong predictor of a variety of outcomes (Case & Deaton, 2015; Davis, 1982; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012; Williams, 2017).[7] Participants with a high-school degree or less education were coded as navigating lower social class contexts and participants with a 4-year college degree or more as navigating higher social class contexts. Across all studies, participants in lower social class contexts reported lower incomes and a greater likelihood of working lower status jobs (e.g., manual or blue collar) compared to participants in higher social class contexts, who had a greater likelihood of working higher status jobs (e.g., professional or managerial; see Supplemental Material for details). This pattern suggests that using dichotomized education serves as a reasonable proxy for the broader construct of social class.

Covariates. Past work has shown age, gender, and marital status are associated with self-perceived social contribution (Fleeson, 2001; Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004; Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). Further, prior research involving self-perceived social contribution has also controlled for participant race and working status, given that both could reasonably relate to perceptions of one's contribution and social well-being more broadly (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004; Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). Here, we account for these factors by including age, gender, race (dichotomized into participants who identify as White and participants who identify as Asian, Asian American, Black, African American, Latino/Latina, Native American, Pacific Islander, multiracial, or any other race/ethnicity listed),[8] marital status (dichotomized into currently married and not currently married), and working status (dichotomized into currently working and not currently working) as covariates in our analyses.

Transparency and Openness

The research materials described in the Method section, anonymized data, and analysis code for all studies can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. To maintain the privacy of participants as stipulated in the Institutional Review Board protocol, participants' raw, open-ended responses are not publicly available. We report the sample size rationale and all data exclusions. For all studies, we used R (Version 4.3.2; R Core Team, 2023), including *tidyverse* (Version 2.0.0; Wickham et al., 2019) for data manipulation and visualization, *effects* (Version 4.2.2; Fox, 2003; Fox & Weisberg, 2019) for constructing effects, and *rcompanion* (Version 2.4.34; Mangiafico, 2022) for estimating pseudo R-squared for generalized linear models. Study 1A's design, hypotheses, and analysis plan were not preregistered.

Results

We report results with covariates in the main text and without covariates in the Supplemental Material. All analyses are robust to dropping covariates unless otherwise stated. Across all studies, social class context was coded as follows: participants in higher social class contexts = 0, participants in lower social class contexts = 1, means represent estimated marginal means from the model, and 95% CI represents 5,000 bootstrapped confidence intervals. We report a Nagelkerke pseudo R-squared for models with Poisson and binomial distributions.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution Scale

We hypothesized that participants in lower social class contexts would report reduced feelings of social contribution compared to participants in higher social class contexts. As expected, a multiple regression revealed that participants in lower social class contexts reported lower self-perceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts, as shown in Figure 2 ($B = -0.57$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [−0.73, −0.40]; $t = -6.79$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$). Notably, the average response of both social class context groups was high and above the scale midpoint, suggesting that most people felt they are contributing overall. However, the social class context disparity was still evident as a consistent

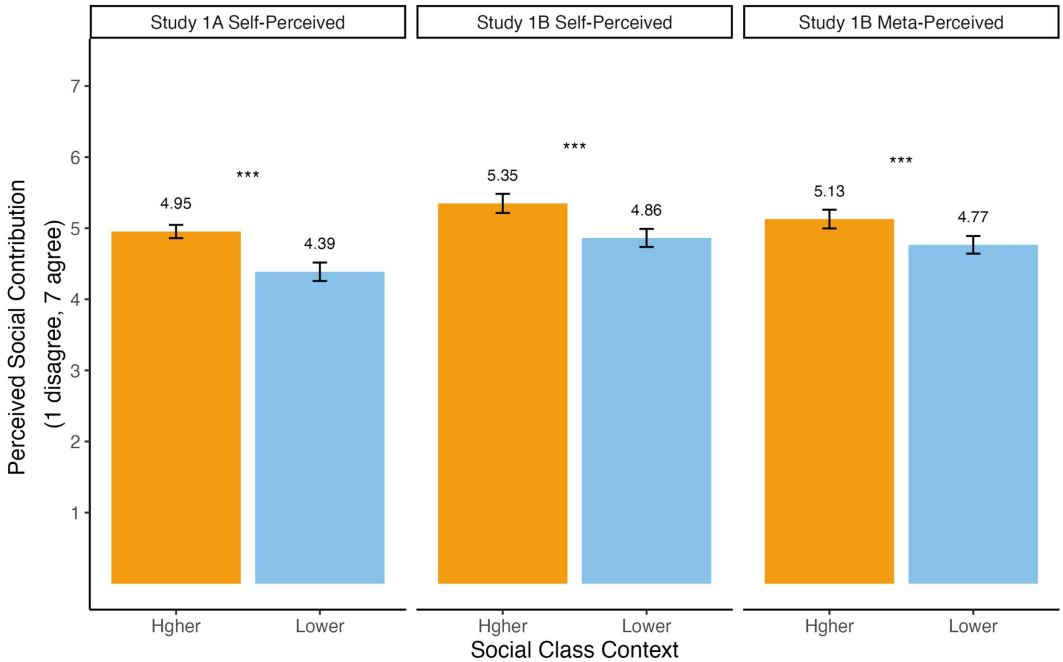
[6] Note that including "choice" in the framing of the prompt may have influenced participant responses. See Study 1B, which includes this same question but without referencing "choice" in the prompt.

[7] We take a "social-class-in-context" approach that considers social classes as contexts people navigate that, on average, vary in the material and social resources available to them. We refer to people in contexts to avoid the risk of essentializing people as in "working class respondents" (i.e., someone's social class is not a fixed trait and can change) and to foreground the role of the contexts people navigate, and the malleability of these contexts, in shaping psychology (Dittmann et al., 2020; Markus, 2017; Stephens et al., in press). We recognize that educational attainment is an individual-level measure that does not directly measure the contexts people navigate. Despite this misalignment, we use educational attainment as a meaningful proxy measure of these contexts and the resources available in them and hope future work can more directly measure the features of the contexts themselves.

[8] For the simplicity of our statistical models, we dichotomized race as a covariate. However, we acknowledge collapsing across many different races and ethnicities presents limitations and challenges. First, it risks reifying the misperception that White Americans are the neutral or default racial identity group. Second, it fails to recognize the varied and diverse experiences of people of different races and ethnicities. Third, it does not explicitly acknowledge that race as a social construct is not a reflection of inherent qualities based on race and ethnicity but rather has meaning due to the varied experiences of people of various races and ethnicities within a racialized society. We hope needed future research on how social contribution relates to race and ethnicity can address these limitations and better capture the nuanced experiences of people of different races and ethnicities. See the General Discussion for further discussion of contribution and race.

Figure 2

Participants in Lower (vs. Higher) Social Class Contexts Report Reduced Self-Perceived and Metaperceived Social Contribution in Studies 1A and 1B



Note. Bars represent the estimated marginal means from the models. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
*** $p < .001$.

difference. In addition to people in higher social class contexts, participants who were older, women, and currently working also reported greater feelings of social contribution, as reported in the Supplemental Material.

Open-Ended Responses to Actions Counted as Contributions

Next, we analyzed participants' open-ended responses to further test for a social class disparity in feelings of contribution.

No Contribution. We hypothesized that participants in lower social class contexts would also be more likely than participants in higher social class contexts to report that they believed they had not contributed. We tested this hypothesis by conducting a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of reporting no contribution from participant social class context. As expected, participants in lower social class contexts were more likely than participants in higher social class contexts to report that *none* of their actions counted as a contribution ($B = 0.79$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.41, 1.17]; $z = 4.04$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$). Specifically, 20% of participants in lower social class contexts reported they had not contributed compared to only 10% in higher social class contexts.

Number of Actions as Contributions. We hypothesized that participants in lower social class contexts would report fewer of their actions counted as contributions compared to participants in higher social class contexts. We tested this hypothesis by conducting a generalized linear regression with a Poisson distribution with estimates in logs to account for the count nature of the outcome. As expected, participants in lower social class contexts listed significantly fewer contributions than participants in higher social class contexts ($M_{\text{Lower social class contexts}} = 1.01$, $M_{\text{Higher social class contexts}} = 1.39$; $B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [−0.45, −0.19], $z = -4.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .26$).[9]

Further, the results show that the number of actions counted as contributions in the open-ended responses was significantly positively correlated with the closed-ended self-perceived social contribution scale, $r(1{,}079) = .30$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.35]; $t = 10.36$, $p < .001$. The relationship remained significant when controlling for social class context and covariates in a multiple regression model predicting the self-perceived social contribution scale from the number of actions counted as contributions ($B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.38]; $t = 7.88$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .16$).

[9] It is possible that the difference in the number of actions listed as contributions could be attributed to differences in persistence in the task. To account for this possibility, we conducted follow-up analyses with two operationalizations of persistence: time spent responding to the open-ended prompt and word count of the response. Even when controlling for these two additional variables, social class context significantly predicted the number of actions listed as contributions ($M_{\text{Lower social class contexts}} = 1.00$, $M_{\text{Higher social class contexts}} = 1.29$; $B = -0.25$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [−0.38, −0.13], $z = -3.88$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .39$).

Discussion

Study 1A found evidence for a social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution—participants in lower social class contexts reported lower self-perceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts via a scale, were more likely to believe that none of their actions count as contributions, and counted fewer of their actions as contributions. One important limitation of Study 1A is that the open-ended prompt defined contributions rather than allowing participants to refer to their own definition of contributions when responding. Specifically, including that "contributions are actions that you choose to do" may have inadvertently influenced participant responses by focusing on choice. We address this limitation in Study 1B.

Study 1B: Social Class Disparity in Metaperceived Contribution

Using closed-ended and open-ended measures, Study 1A provided evidence of the previously reported yet unexplored social class disparity in the belief that one contributes something meaningful to their community, society, and the world as assessed by the perceiver. Study 1B builds on Study 1A's findings in two ways. First, Study 1B investigated how people believe *other people* perceive their contributions to society. Specifically, we expected that people in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts would perceive that other people view them as making less of a contribution to society. Second, Study 1B addressed a limitation of the open-ended prompt used in Study 1A by using a prompt that does not define contributions. We expected that the social class disparity in self-perceived contributions found in Study 1A will still be evident and also extend to metaperceived contribution.

Method

Participants and Power

U.S. citizens who had not participated in our previous studies related to contributions were recruited via Prolific Academic. We aimed to balance the sample by social class context (i.e., high-school degree or less education, college degree or more education) crossed with gender (men, women) for a total of four sampling cells. We aimed to recruit approximately the same number of participants as in Study 1A. We took care to avoid recruiting participants who had completed some college or had an Associate's degree by using a prescreen question, given that social class can be difficult to designate for these groups. The final sample (N = 1,052) was 52.85% people with high-school degrees or less education, 48.86% women, and 75.76% White/European American (M_{age} = 39.61 years, SD_{age} = 13.98 years; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics).

Measures

Participants completed an online survey that included measures of social contributions and demographic questions.

Open-Ended Responses to Actions Counted as Contributions. Participants responded to the following open-ended question:

> Think about your actions over the past week. Take into account all that you do, in terms of time, money, or concern, on your job, and for your family, friends, and the community. List any and all actions that contribute to making the world a better place.

This prompt reflects the same prompt in Study 1A but without the first sentence referencing choice (i.e., "Contributions are actions that you choose to do, you hope benefit others or the world, and reflect your goals.").

No Contribution. One of the coders who was trained on coding the open-ended data in Study 1A coded the open-ended responses following the same criteria for the "none" category, specifically if participants stated they had not made a contribution.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution Scale. Self-perceived social contribution was measured using the same three-item scale in Study 1A (M = 5.09, SD = 1.51, α = .89).

Metaperceived Social Contribution Scale. Metaperceived social contribution was measured using an adapted version of the self-perceived social contribution scale. Specifically, "other people think" was added before each of the three scale items (e.g., "Other people think I have something valuable to give to the world"). The scale is the mean of the three items, and items were measured from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* (M = 4.93, SD = 1.45, α = .88).

Social Class Context. Social class context was measured using the criteria in Study 1A.

Covariates. We included the same covariates as in Study 1A, specifically controlling for age, gender, race, marital status, and working status.

Transparency and Openness

The research materials described in the Method section, anonymized data, and analysis code can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. To maintain the privacy of participants as stipulated in the Institutional Review Board protocol, participants' raw, open-ended responses are not publicly available. We report the sample size rationale and all data exclusions. Study 1B's design, hypotheses, and analysis plan were not preregistered.

Results

We report results with covariates in the main text and without covariates in the Supplemental Material. All analyses are robust to dropping covariates unless otherwise stated. We report a Nagelkerke pseudo R-squared for models with binomial distributions.

Open-Ended Responses to Actions Counted as Contributions

We analyzed participants' open-ended responses to test for a social class disparity in feelings of contribution with the updated prompt.

No Contribution. Replicating Study 1A, a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of reporting no contribution from participant social class context shows participants in lower social class contexts were more likely than participants in higher social class contexts to report that none of their actions counted as a contribution to society (B = 1.76; SE = 0.50, 95% CI [0.85, 2.87]; z = 3.49, p < .001,

R^2 = .15). Specifically, 6% of participants in lower social class contexts reported they had not contributed compared to only 1% in higher social class contexts.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution Scale

Replicating the social class disparity reported in Study 1A and found in previous research, a multiple regression revealed that participants in lower social class contexts reported lower self-perceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts ($B = -0.49$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.68, −0.29]; $t = -4.96$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .11$). See Figure 2.

Metaperceived Social Contribution Scale

We hypothesized that participants in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts would also report reduced feelings of metaperceived social contribution. As expected, and mirroring the results for self-perceived social contribution, a multiple regression revealed that participants in lower social class contexts reported lower metaperceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts ($B = -0.36$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.55, −0.17]; $t = -3.79$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .09$). See Figure 2.

Relationship Between Metaperceived and Self-Perceived Social Contribution

We also investigated the relationship between participants' self-perceptions and metaperceptions. The metaperceived social contribution scale was significantly positively correlated with the self-perceived social contribution scale, $r(968) = .64$, 95% CI [0.60, 0.68]; $t = 26.15$, $p < .001$. The relationship remained significant when controlling for participant social class context and covariates in a multiple regression model predicting the metaperceived social contribution scale from the self-perceived social contribution scale ($B = 0.59$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.64]; $t = 23.69$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .42$). Together, these results suggest that people's metacontributions are strongly correlated but not completely overlapping with their self-perceptions of their social contributions.

Overall, Study 1B replicated the finding in Study 1A that participants in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts were more likely to count none of their actions as a contribution to society, suggesting the social class disparity in self-perceived contribution in Study 1A was not driven by the question wording. Further, Study 1B found evidence for a social class disparity in metaperceived social contribution—people in lower, compared to higher, social class contexts expected others to think that they contribute less to society. Overall, the results suggest that people in lower social class contexts must not only contend with their own reduced perceptions of their social contributions compared to their higher social class counterparts but also expect other people to perceive them as contributing less.

Discussion

Study 1 found evidence that the social class disparity in the belief that one meaningfully contributes to others that was first reported two decades ago persists today, using both open- and closed-ended measures.[10] Further, Study 1B found that the social class disparity extended to metaperceptions of social contribution—Americans navigating lower social class contexts, on average, perceived that others viewed them less as valuable, contributing members of society compared to Americans navigating higher social class contexts. One could suggest that people in lower social class contexts reported reduced feelings of social contribution because they, on average, simply do less for others and society. That is not how we interpret the findings. Study 1 did not ask about *all* the actions people had taken but rather which actions *counted* as contributions. Further, past work suggests Americans across the social class spectrum, on average, are doing good for others in many ways that can vary with social class positioning (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020; Macchia & Whillans, 2021; Rossi, 2001a). Thus, we next investigated what types of helping actions are perceived as contributions as one potential way to understand the social class disparities documented in Study 1.[11]

Study 2: Bridging Help Perceived as More of a Contribution Than Bonding Help

To probe one potential source of the social class disparity in perceived contributions, Study 2 tested for the presence of a default model of social good by investigating what types of help Americans evaluate as contributions to society. We hypothesized that help to distant others (i.e., bridging help, such as volunteering) would be perceived as more worthy and valuable contributions than help to close others (i.e., bonding help, such as assisting a family member with needed care). Employing a controlled design with structured vignettes, Study 2 contrasted bridging help to distant others and bonding help to close others to investigate whether participants across the social class spectrum endorse the default model of the social good. In contrast to Study 1 which considers peoples' perceptions of their own contributions, Study 2 considers how much people assess *other* people's actions as contributions.

Further, past work has found that people who help strangers versus kin are perceived as more morally good, which is a key aspect of person perception (Goodwin, 2015; Goodwin et al., 2014; McManus et al., 2020). Given that default models are thought to reflect shared understandings of what is moral and of value in a given domain, Study 2 also assessed the perceived moral goodness of people who help distant versus close others to replicate this effect. Additionally, because acting out of choice is a key aspect of moral action in the U.S. American context, Study 2 assessed if the perceived choice to help served as a mechanism partly explaining why Americans consider help to distant (vs. close) others as more of a contribution.[12] Lastly,

[10] The current article focuses on contributing to society, though it is possible that people differ in how much they include close others (e.g., family) in their schema of society. To address this possibility, we analyzed the results of Studies 1B, 2, 3, and 5 presented in this article with closed-ended measures of contributing to others' well-being. We find the pattern of results is consistent for both contributing to society and contributing to others' well-being (see Supplemental Material for more details).

[11] We also conducted a preregistered study investigating how some of the open-ended responses from Study 1A were perceived as contributions by independent raters. During the review process, this study was removed to the Supplemental Material for ease of readability.

[12] We focused on the role of choice as a mediator partially explaining why help to distant others is perceived as more of a contribution to society than help to close others. However, perceived choice is likely one of several potential mediators. We also explored the role of perceived selfishness as an additional potential mediator in this study and reported the results in the Supplemental Material.

as a measure of whether an action is perceived as making a large enough contribution that it is deemed worthy of formal recognition, Study 2 assessed whether giving help to others is worthy of a tax credit.

Method

Participants and Power

We recruited 401 U.S. citizens who had not participated in our previous studies related to this topic via Prolific Academic. We aimed to balance the sample by social class context (i.e., high-school degree or less education, college degree or more education) crossed with gender (men, women) for a total of four sample cells. As detailed in our preregistration (https://osf.io/cw5eg), our target sample size was 400 participants.[13] We excluded current college students (n = 7) and participants who did not pass all three attention checks (n = 17). When we conducted this study, we were interested in the perceived contribution of helping actions both via time and through monetary contributions. Since then, our focus has narrowed to only helping via time. As a result, we deviated from our preregistration and excluded participants who were randomly assigned to evaluate a scenario about people who helped by donating money (n = 103). The final sample (N = 282) was 50.71% people with high-school degrees or less education, 49.29% women, and 69.50% White (M_{age} = 35.98 years, SD_{age} = 11.43 years; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics).[14]

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey in which they were randomly assigned to read one of three short vignettes describing two people helping others (e.g., "Over the past year, Taylor and Jamie each consistently spend one night a week tutoring a younger student"). In each vignette, one person helped someone distant from them (e.g., "Taylor tutors a student in an after-school program") while the other person helped someone close to them (e.g., "Jamie tutors their younger cousin"). We counterbalanced which character (Jamie vs. Taylor) helped a close versus distant person and whether participants read about the person helping the close versus distant person first. The vignettes held many details constant (e.g., the frequency and duration of help) while varying the recipient of help for a tightly controlled design. After reading the short vignette, participants answered questions about each character. See the preregistration for complete measures.

Measures

Participants rated each of the two people in the vignettes (i.e., Jamie and Taylor) and completed demographic measures.

Rating Others' Help. Participants rated each character (i.e., Jamie and Taylor) and their actions (e.g., tutoring) on the following dimensions.

Contribution to Society. Participants rated, "How much do [e.g., Jamie, Taylor]'s [action] contribute to making the world and society a better place?" For example, in the tutoring scenario, participants rated, "How much do Taylor's tutoring sessions contribute to making the world and society a better place?" Ratings were on a scale from 1 = *no contribution at all* to 5 = *an enormous contribution* (M = 3.80, SD = 1.05).

Moral Goodness. Participants rated, "How morally good is [e.g., Jamie, Taylor]?" on a scale from 1 = *not morally good at all* to 5 = *extremely morally good* (M = 4.18, SD = 0.80). This measure investigates whether the value placed on help to distant versus close others reflects the belief that people who help in this way are more moral than those who help in other ways.

Choice. Participants rated, "How much of a choice did [e.g., Jamie, Taylor] have to [action]?" on a scale from 1 = *no choice at all* to 5 = *a great deal of choice* (M = 4.14, SD = 1.01).

Worthy of a Tax Credit. As an indication of whether people think a given action would make a difference in the world such that it should be formally recognized, participants were instructed that "some people get a tax credit (i.e., they pay less tax) to recognize they have contributed to others and society." Then participants rated, "How much, if any, should [e.g., Jamie, Taylor] receive in a tax credit for [action]?" on a scale from 1 = *none at all* to 5 = *a great deal* (M = 2.96, SD = 1.32).[15]

Social Class Context. Social class context was measured using the criteria in Study 1.

Transparency and Openness

Study 2's research materials, anonymized data, and analysis code can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. We report the rationale for our sample size as well as all data exclusions. In Studies 2, 3, 4, and 5, we used the *lme4* (Version 1.1.35.1; Bates et al., 2015) and *lmerTest* (Version 3.1.3; Kuznetsova et al., 2017) to conduct mixed models, and *MuMIn* (Version 1.47.5; Bartoń, 2020) to calculate R-squared statistics for mixed models. In Studies 2 and 4, we used *mediation* (Version 4.5.0; Tingley et al., 2014) to conduct the mediation analysis. Study 2's design and analysis plan were preregistered at https://osf.io/cw5eg. We preregistered four hypotheses and an analysis plan testing the effect of the recipient of help on the perceived contribution to society, moral goodness, perceived choice to help, and worthiness of a tax credit.

[13] For the repeated measures design with a within–between interaction, a power analysis conducted using G*Power software (Erdfelder et al., 1996) suggests a target total sample size of approximately 330 participants. Given the greater sample size needed to detect interactions with possible heterogeneity in the effect (Gelman, 2018), we increased the suggested sample and arrived at recruiting a total of 400 participants.

[14] Because we excluded more participants than originally planned, Study 2 fell below the target sample size. To confirm the study had sufficient power to detect the effects found, we conducted a post hoc power sensitivity test using G*Power and found the final sample of 282 participants was 95% powered to detect an effect size of f = 0.108 with a standard .05 α error probability for a within-subjects factor. The four primary, confirmation analyses presented below have effect sizes that are greater than f = 0.108 (the smallest effect size found was f = 0.1156), suggesting the study had sufficient power.

[15] Not all tax credits could reasonably be considered a way to formally recognize that someone has contributed to others and society. Further, people cannot currently receive tax credits for their time spent helping volunteering, as an example. However, we asked this question and stated that some tax credits can reasonably be considered through this lens of contributing as one way to understand if people would endorse such tax credits as a form of formal recognition if that were an option in this hypothetical scenario.

Results

We investigated if help to distant (vs. close) others is perceived as more of a worthy contribution and tested whether the effects were evident both among participants in higher social class contexts and lower social class contexts. Lastly, we conducted follow-up analyses designated as exploratory in the preregistration to assess the role of the perceived choice to help in these judgments.

Recipient of Help

We conducted linear mixed-effects models for each outcome, including a fixed effect of the recipient (close vs. distant) and a random intercept of the participant.[16] Marginal R-squared (R^2m) represents the variance explained only by the fixed effects. Conditional R-squared (R^2c) represents the variance explained by the full model, including fixed and random effects. Results are also shown in Figure 3.

Contribution to Society. Supporting the preregistered hypothesis, help to distant others was perceived as significantly more of a contribution to society than help to close others ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.43]; $t = 7.37$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .03$, $R^2c = .73$).

Moral Goodness. Overall, helpers were perceived as very morally good, reflected in the high means across both conditions. However, supporting the preregistered hypothesis and replicating past work showing this effect, people who helped distant others were rated as significantly more moral than people who helped close others ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.25]; $t = 5.18$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .01$, $R^2c = .72$; McManus et al., 2020).

Choice. As hypothesized in the preregistration, people who helped distant others were rated as having significantly more of a choice to help than people who helped close others ($B = 0.37$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.48]; $t = 6.55$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .03$, $R^2c = .56$).

Worthy of a Tax Credit. Supporting the preregistered hypothesis again, help to distant others was perceived as significantly more deserving of a tax credit than help to close others ($B = 0.45$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.55]; $t = 8.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .03$, $R^2c = .76$).

Effect of Recipient of Help Within Each Social Class Context

Follow-up analyses designated as exploratory in the preregistration test if the effect of the recipient of help is evident among participants in higher and lower social class contexts. We repeated the linear mixed-effects models for each outcome only among participants in lower social class contexts and only among participants in higher social class contexts (i.e., two separate models for each outcome). The simple effect analyses show a significant main effect of the recipient of help among participants in lower social class contexts and participants in higher social class contexts on contribution to society, moral goodness, choice, and worthiness of a tax credit as shown in Table 1.[17]

Choice Partially Mediates the Effect of Recipient of Help on Perceived Contribution

Next, we investigated if people perceive help to distant others as more of a contribution than help to close others in part because it reflects more choice to help. To do so, we investigated the role of choice as a potential mediator by conducting follow-up analyses designated as exploratory in the preregistration. Specifically, we conducted mixed model mediation analyses with 1,000 simulations for each of the three primary outcomes: perceived contribution to society, moral goodness, and worthiness of a tax credit. As expected, the results show a significant indirect effect of choice meditating the effect of the recipient of help (0 = close, 1 = stranger) on contribution to society (*indirect effect* = 0.07, 95% CI [0.04, .11], $p < .001$; *total effect* = 0.34, 95% CI [0.25, 0.44], $p < .001$), moral goodness (*indirect effect* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.03, 0.09], $p < .001$; *total effect* = 0.18, 95% CI [0.11, 0.26], $p < .001$), and worthiness of a tax credit (*indirect effect* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.03, 0.10], $p < .001$; *total effect* = 0.45, 95% CI [0.33, 0.55], $p < .001$). We interpret the mediation analyses as correlational, not causal. However, they provide some evidence that choosing to help others, which is a good indicator of moral action in the United States, rather than being obligated to do so, plays a role in why Americans view helping distant others (i.e., bridging help) more positively than helping close others (i.e., bonding help).

Discussion

When directly comparing help to distant versus close others while holding many other variables constant, Study 2 found that Americans across social class contexts perceived help to distant others (i.e., bridging help) as more of a contribution to society that is worthy of institutional recognition than help to close others (i.e., bonding help). The results also show that help to distant others may be perceived as more of a contribution to society than help to close others in part because help to distant others reflects more of a choice to act. Furthermore, Study 2 found that Americans viewed people who help distant others as more moral than those who help close others, replicating past work showing this effect and suggesting that perceptions of the type of help extended to the judgments of the person helping (McManus et al., 2020). Together, Study 2 provides evidence for a default model of social good, which we theorized is one possible factor contributing to the social class disparity in feelings of contribution.

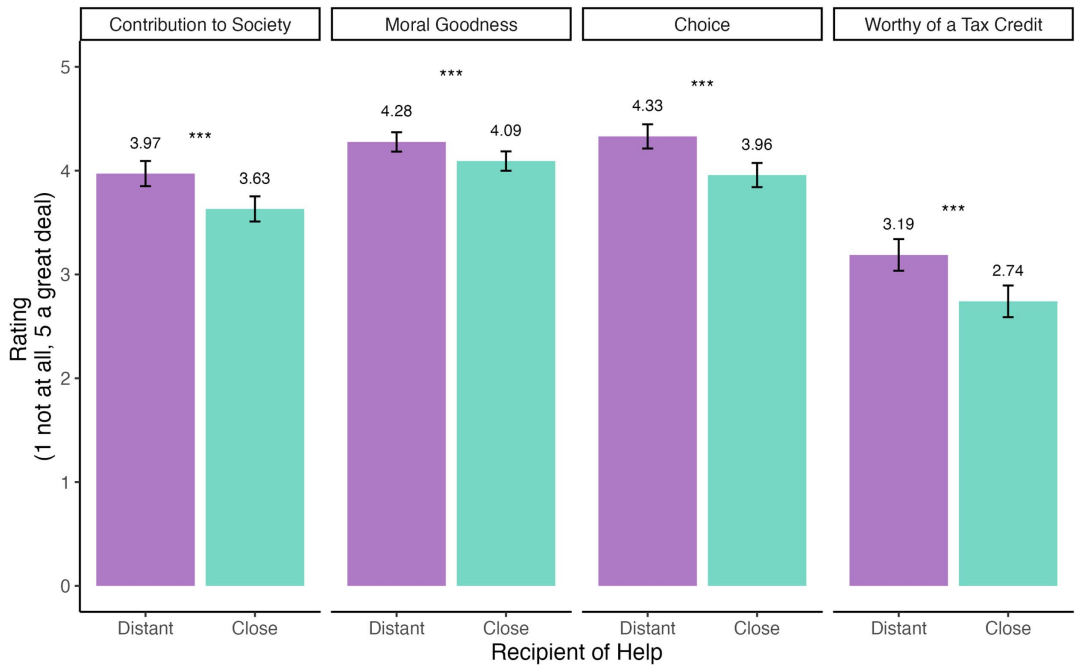
Study 3: Choice and the Default Model of Social Good

Study 3 builds on Study 2's finding that choice is one reason why help to distant others is perceived as more of a contribution to society than help to close others. Specifically, Study 3 experimentally manipulated the role of choice in helping distant others. Prior work

[16] Best practices for linear mixed-effects models often involve maximal random-effects structures (Barr et al., 2013). In many cases, this would involve more random-effects terms, such as a random slope for condition. However, in the particular case of the models presented in Studies 2, 3, and 4, there is only one observation per participant per cell with no other within-subjects predictors, which makes models with only a random intercept sufficient to produce unbiased results (Barr et al., 2013; Brauer & Curtin, 2018).

[17] Analyses investigating whether any effects are moderated by social class contexts are reported in the Supplemental Material. We refrain from interpreting them, given that the current sample is not well-powered to detect whether the effect meaningfully differs or not by participant social class context. Instead, we focus our investigation on whether the effects are evident within each social class context.

Figure 3
Helping Distant (vs. Close) Others Perceived as More of a Contribution, More Moral, Reflecting More Choice, and More Worthy of Tax Credit



Note. Bars represent the estimated marginal means from the mixed models. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
*** $p < .001$.

suggests a special obligation to help a family member exists, such that helping a family member in need is expected and failing to do so is a moral violation (Jeske, 1998; McManus et al., 2020). Therefore, manipulating choosing versus being required to help a family member may inadvertently shift the perceived need of the person being helped. Thus, this initial investigation did not probe the role of choice in helping close others. If help to distant others is perceived as more of a contribution than help to close others, in part, because it is perceived as reflecting the choice to act (rather than being obligated to act), then *choosing* to help a distant other will be perceived as more of a contribution to society than being *required* to help a distant other or helping a *close* other (i.e., a family member). Here, Study 3 addresses whether choice is part of why helping distant others is perceived as a contribution, laying the foundation for future work to investigate the causal role of choice in how help to close others is perceived. In addition to experimentally testing the role of choice in helping distant others, Study 3 also aimed to conceptually replicate Study 2's finding that people who help distant (vs. close) others are perceived as more morally good and tested another measure of formal recognition.

Table 1
Simple Effects of the Recipient of Help Among Participants in Higher and Lower Social Class Contexts

Participant social class context	$M_{Distant}$	M_{Close}	*B*	*SE*	[95% CI]	*t*	*p*	R^2m	R^2c
Contribution to society									
Lower	3.84	3.50	0.34	0.06	[0.23, 0.46]	5.75	<.001	.02	.81
Higher	4.11	3.77	0.34	0.07	[0.20, 0.48]	4.75	<.001	.03	.58
Moral goodness									
Lower	4.26	4.10	0.15	0.05	[0.06, 0.25]	3.21	.002	.008	.77
Higher	4.29	4.08	0.22	0.05	[0.11, 0.32]	4.09	<.001	.02	.67
Choice									
Lower	4.37	4.05	0.32	0.07	[0.17, 0.47]	4.31	<.001	.02	.63
Higher	4.29	3.86	0.42	0.09	[0.26, 0.59]	4.93	<.001	.05	.47
Worthy of a tax credit									
Lower	3.01	2.58	0.43	0.07	[0.30, 0.56]	6.55	<.001	.03	.82
Higher	3.37	2.91	0.46	0.09	[0.29, 0.63]	5.23	<.001	.03	.69

Note. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

Method

Participants and Power

U.S. citizens ($N = 522$) who had not participated in the previous studies related to contributions were recruited via Prolific Academic. As in Study 2, we aimed to balance the sample by social class context (i.e., high-school degree or less education, college degree or more education) crossed with gender (men, women) for a total of four sample cells. As detailed in the preregistration (https://osf.io/fnm3c), the target sample size was 520 participants. We excluded current college students ($n = 10$) and participants who did not pass all three attention checks ($n = 11$). The final sample ($N = 502$) was 52.19% people with high-school degrees or less education, 50.0% women, and 78.69% White/European American ($M_{age} = 44.78$ years, $SD_{age} = 13.40$ years; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics).

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey in which they were randomly assigned to read about one of three helping behaviors (e.g., tutoring a younger student). For each of these helping behaviors, participants read about three people who engaged in this helping behavior. One person was *required* to help someone distant to them (e.g., "Jamie's parents require them to spend one night a week tutoring a younger student who needs extra help in an after-school program."). One person *chose* to help someone distant to them (e.g., "Taylor doesn't have to but chooses to spend one night a week tutoring a younger student who needs extra help in an after-school program."). Lastly, one person helped someone close to them ("Casey spends one night a week tutoring their younger cousin who needs extra help."). Participants completed outcome measures for each person after reading about their helping behavior. See the preregistration for complete measures. Each character and their helping behavior were presented one at a time and in a random order across participants.

Measures

Participants rated each of the three people in the vignettes (i.e., Jamie, Taylor, and Casey) on the amount of choice to help, perceived contribution, moral goodness, and how much recognition they deserve for their help. Lastly, participants completed demographics including social class context.

Rating Others' Help. Participants rated each character (i.e., Jamie, Taylor, and Casey) and their actions (e.g., tutoring) on the following dimensions.

Choice. As a manipulation check, participants rated, "How much of a choice did [e.g., Jamie, Taylor, Casey] have to [action]?" on a scale from 1 = *no choice at all* to 5 = *a great deal of choice* ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.56$).

Contribution to Society. Mirroring the contribution item in Study 2, participants rated, "How much do [e.g., Jamie, Taylor, Casey]'s [action] contribute to making the world and society a better place?" Ratings were on a scale from 1 = *no contribution at all* to 5 = *an enormous contribution* ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.02$).

Moral Goodness. Mirroring the moral goodness item in Study 2, participants rated, "How morally good is [e.g., Jamie, Taylor, Casey]?" on a scale from 1 = *not morally good at all* to 5 = *extremely morally good* ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.95$).

Deserving of Recognition. Participants rated, "How much should [e.g., Jamie, Taylor, Casey] be recognized (e.g., receive an award) for [action]?" on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal* ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.27$).

Social Class Context. Social class context was measured using the criteria in Studies 1 and 2.

Transparency and Openness

Study 3's research materials, anonymized data, and analysis code can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. We report the rationale for the sample size as well as all data exclusions. Study 3 used *ggsignif* package (Version 0.6.4; Ahlmann-Eltze & Patil, 2021) for data visualization. Study 3's design and analysis plan were preregistered at https://osf.io/fnm3c. We preregistered four hypotheses and an analysis plan testing the effect of condition on the perceived choice to help, perceived contribution to society, moral goodness, and deservingness of recognition.

Results

We investigated if choosing to help a distant other was perceived more positively than being required to help a distant other or helping a family member. We also conducted follow-up analyses designed as exploratory in the preregistration that investigate whether perceptions of being required to help a distant other differed from helping a close other, which are reported in the Supplemental Material. Lastly, we tested if the effects were evident both among participants in higher and lower social class contexts.

Recipient of Help

We conducted linear mixed-effects models for each outcome, including a fixed effect of the condition (choice distant vs. required distant vs. close) and a random intercept of the participant. Results are also shown in Figure 4.

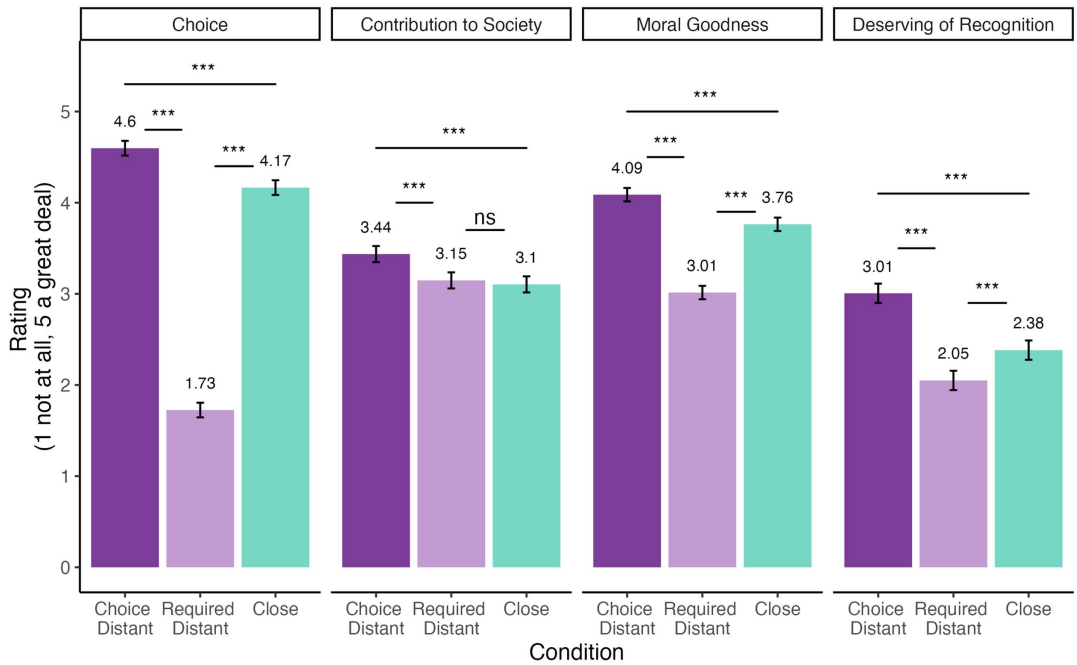
First, the results show a significant main effect of condition on each of the four dependent variables, as shown in Table 2. To probe the main effects, we next conducted pairwise comparisons to compare the three experimental conditions (i.e., choice distant, required distant, and close) for each of the outcomes.

Choice to Help Distant Versus Required to Help Distant or Help to Close. Reflecting the primary confirmatory hypotheses in the preregistration, we compared choosing to help distant others versus being required to help distant others or helping close others.[18]

[18] To understand whether the effects presented for this within-subjects design may also be apparent with a between-subjects design, we analyzed only the first stimuli each participant was randomly assigned to rate as a proxy for a between-subjects design. The results remained consistent such that choosing to help distant others was perceived as reflecting more choice (the manipulation check), as more of a contribution to society, more morally good, and more deserving of recognition than required help to distant others or help to close others. The contribution of choosing to help a distant other versus being forced to help a distant other did not reach traditional standards of significance ($p = .09$) nor did the moral goodness of choosing to help a distant other versus helping a close other ($p = .051$), which may reflect small effects and relatively less power to detect them. Together, these additional analyses suggest the effects of the default model experiments that are assessed with within-subjects designs are small effects but nonetheless may likely be apparent in a between-subjects design. See Supplemental Material for full reporting of results.

Figure 4

Choosing to Help Distant (vs. Required to Help Distant or Help to Close) Others Perceived as Reflecting More Choice, Contribution, Moral Goodness, and Deserving of Recognition



Note. Bars represent the estimated marginal means from the mixed models. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
ns $p > .1$. *** $p < .001$.

Choice. To test if the experimental manipulation of choice to help was successful, we analyzed the perceived choice to help. As hypothesized in the preregistration, participants rated *choosing* to help a distant other as reflecting more choice to help than being *required* to help a distant other ($B = 2.87$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [2.76, 2.98], $t = 51.03$, $p < .001$). Choosing to help a distant other was also perceived as reflecting more choice than helping a *close* other ($B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.54], $t = 7.68$, $p < .001$), conceptually replicating Study 2's findings on choice. Notably, helping a *close* other was perceived as reflecting a relatively high degree of choice.

Contribution to Society. Supporting the preregistered hypothesis, participants rated *choosing* to help a distant other as making more of a contribution to society than being *required* to help a distant other ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.36], $t = 8.42$, $p < .001$) or helping a *close* other ($B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.40], $t = 9.70$, $p < .001$).

Moral Goodness. Participants rated people who *chose* to help a distant other as more morally good than people who were *required* to help a distant other ($B = 1.07$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [1.00, 1.15], $t = 26.76$, $p < .001$) or people who helped a *close* other ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.40], $t = 8.09$, $p < .001$), supporting the preregistered hypothesis again and conceptually replicating Study 2's findings on moral goodness and past work showing this effect.

Deserving of Recognition. Lastly and as hypothesized in the preregistration, participants rated *choosing* to help a distant other as deserving of more recognition than being *required* to help a distant other ($B = 0.96$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.87, 1.05], $t = 20.61$, $p < .001$)

Table 2

Significant Main Effect of Condition on Outcome Measures

Measure	*M* Choice	*M* Required	*M* Close	*F*	*p*	R^2m	R^2c
Choice	4.60	1.73	4.17	1514.1	<.001	.65	.67
Contribution to society	3.44	3.15	3.10	55.54	<.001	.02	.72
Moral goodness	4.09	3.01	3.76	376.67	<.001	.22	.56
Deserving of recognition	3.01	2.05	2.38	218.89	<.001	.10	.67

or helping a *close* other ($B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.53, 0.71], $t = 13.44$, $p < .001$).

Effect of Recipient of Help Within Each Social Class Context

As in Study 2, follow-up analyses designated as exploratory in our preregistration tested if the effect of condition on the outcomes was evident among participants in higher and lower social class contexts. Following the same analytical approach as in Study 2, we repeated the linear mixed-effects models for each outcome only among participants in lower social class contexts and only among participants in higher social class contexts (i.e., two separate models for each outcome). We found the same pattern of results for the sample within each social class context (see Supplemental Material for full reporting of the simple effects).

Discussion

Study 3 provided experimental evidence for a default model of social good in the United States that considers help to distant others as a worthy contribution to society, in part, because it is perceived as reflecting a choice to help. When choice was removed from helping a distant other (i.e., being required to help a distant other), it was no longer perceived as more of a contribution than choosing to help a distant other or helping a close other. Such findings lend support for the notion that help to distant others (i.e., bridging help) is perceived as more of a contribution than help to close others (i.e., bonding help), because help to distant others is thought to reflect more choice than helping a close other. Notably, this initial investigation into the causal role of choice did not experimentally manipulate the role of choice in help to close others, which can be teased apart in future work to better understand choice and the default model of social good. Such work can also include a neutral control that does not specify the amount of choice of help to distant others for a more conservative test of the hypotheses proposed here. Overall, Study 3 provides further experimental evidence for the default model of social good and the causal role of choice in helping distant others being perceived as a contribution to society.

Study 4: The Default Model of Social Good Among Helpers

Studies 2–3 provided converging experimental evidence for a shared default model of the social good. Yet, we do not know if this difference in the perceived contribution of help indeed extends to people doing the help themselves. As one example, those intimately involved in unpaid caregiving for close others may be better positioned to see and recognize the contribution their labor makes to society. However, we expected that the default model of social good is pervasive to such an extent that even those helping close others will still endorse the model and believe that help to distant others is more of a contribution to society.

Method

Participants and Power

Adults living in the United States were recruited via Dynata, the same participant recruitment service used in Study 1A. We aimed to roughly balance the sample by social class context (high-school degree or less education, college degree or more education), gender (men, women), geographic region (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), and political party (Democrat, Republican) for a total of 32 sampling cells. As detailed in the preregistration (https://osf.io/nydc), the target sample size was 1,350 participants. To recruit enough participants to meet each of the 32 quotas, Dynata oversampled and recruited 1,399 participants. We excluded participants who did not pass both attention checks ($n = 160$). The final sample ($N = 1{,}239$) was 51.65% participants with college degrees or more education, 50.44% women, and 79.10% White/European American ($M_{age} = 51.96$ years, $SD_{age} = 16.98$ years; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics).

Measures

Participants completed an online survey that included measures of help given to others, perceptions of their help and help in general, and demographic questions.

Helping Behavior. First, participants indicated if they had participated (i.e., responded "yes" or "no") in each of the three helping behaviors. Past work suggests nearly all caregivers providing unpaid assistance to close others assist with instrumental activities of daily living in some form (e.g., managing finances, arranging outside services). However, not all those providing unpaid assistance help with activities of daily living, which more often requires in-person, physical help (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020). Given this distinction in designating various types of caregiving, the present study asks about two different forms of unpaid caregiving, namely *hands-on unpaid assistance* and *remote or information-based unpaid assistance.* While we expected help to distant others, such as volunteering, to be perceived as more of a contribution to society than help to close others overall, we designed the study to be able to explore if the various forms of unpaid assistance that require varying levels of in-person involvement influenced any potential effects. However, for the sake of brevity and the primary purposes of the present study, we report the results comparing volunteering and hands-on unpaid assistance in the main text and report the results comparing volunteering and remote unpaid assistance in the Supplemental Material.

Volunteering Engagement. Participants responded "yes" or "no" to the question "At any time in the last 12 months, have you participated in any formal volunteer work?"

Hands-On Unpaid Assistance Engagement. Participants responded "yes" or "no" to the question "At any time in the last 12 months, have you provided hands-on unpaid care to a relative or friend to help them take care of themselves? This may include providing transportation, doing household chores, or preparing meals, among other activities."

Perceptions of Own Help. For each helping behavior (e.g., volunteering, hands-on unpaid assistance to others) that participants indicated engaging in, participants responded to the following questions about that helping behavior.

Contribution to Society. Participants rated, "How much do the hours you spend [e.g., providing hands-on unpaid assistance to close others, doing formal volunteer work] contribute to society?" Ratings were on a scale from 1 = *no contribution at all* to 5 = *an enormous contribution* ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.28$).

Choice. Participants rated, "How much of a choice did you have to spend these hours [e.g., providing hands-on unpaid assistance to close others, doing formal volunteer work]?" on a scale from 1 = *no choice at all* to 5 = *a great deal of choice* (M = 3.63, SD = 1.32).

Perceptions of Help in General. All participants, regardless of whether they indicated engaging in helping behaviors or not, responded to the following questions about their perceptions of help in general for each of the helping behaviors.

Contribution to Society. Participants rated, "In general, how much do hours spent [e.g., providing hands-on unpaid assistance to close others, doing formal volunteer work] contribute to society?" Ratings were on a scale from 1 = *no contribution at all* to 5 = *an enormous contribution* (M = 2.81, SD = 1.33).

Choice. Participants rated, "In general, how much of a choice do people usually have to [e.g., provide hands-on unpaid assistance to close others, do formal volunteer work]?" on a scale from 1 = *no choice at all* to 5 = *a great deal of choice* (M = 3.42, SD = 1.24).

Social Class Context. Social class context was measured using the same criteria in Studies 1–3.

Covariates. We included social class context (i.e., dichotomized into those with or without a 4-year college degree), age, gender, race (dichotomized as in Study 1), marital status (dichotomized into currently married vs. not currently married), and working status (dichotomized into currently working vs. not working) as covariates in the analyses. We did not list working status as a covariate in our preregistration; however, we added it to account for any effects of employment on helping behaviors and perceptions of those behaviors. Covariate descriptive statistics are reported in the Supplemental Material.

Transparency and Openness

Study 4's research materials, anonymized data, and analysis code can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. We report the rationale for the sample size as well as all data exclusions. Study 4 used *emmeans* (Version 1.8.9; Lenth, 2023) to estimate marginal means. Study 4's design and analysis plan were preregistered at https://osf.io/nyudc. We preregistered two hypotheses and an analysis plan testing the effect of the type of help (i.e., volunteering vs. unpaid assistance) on the perceived contribution to society and perceived choice to help.

Results

We investigated if volunteering was perceived as more of a contribution to society that reflects more of a choice to help than hands-on unpaid assistance to close others. We also investigated the role of the perceived choice to help in judgments of the contribution to society of help. We report results with covariates in the main text and without covariates in the Supplemental Material. Analyses are robust to dropping covariates unless otherwise stated.

Perceptions of Own Help

We investigated participants' perceptions of their own helping behaviors. We conducted linear mixed-effects models for each outcome, including a fixed effect of the within-subjects variable indicating the type of help being evaluated (volunteering vs. hands-on unpaid assistance), fixed effects for the covariates, and a random intercept of the participant. Because participants only responded to the questions about perceptions of their own help if they reported engaging in that type of help, every participant did not have the opportunity to respond to these specific sets of questions. Thus, linear mixed models leveraging all available data points may potentially have biased estimates given the nonrandom missingness (Rubin, 1976). To account for this potential bias, we conducted the linear mixed models for each outcome only including participants who reported engaging in both types of help being compared. These analyses reduce the sample size but avoid potential biases of nonrandom missingness. Here, we present the results of the models only among participants engaging in both helping behaviors (n = 314) and report the results of the mixed models leveraging all available data points in the Supplemental Material, which yielded substantively equivalent results.

Supporting the confirmatory preregistered hypotheses, participants rated their time spent volunteering as more of a contribution to society and as reflecting more of a choice to help than hands-on unpaid assistance, as reported in Table 3.

Perceptions of Help in General

To understand how participants perceived the contribution of volunteering and unpaid assistance in general, we conducted linear mixed-effects models for each outcome, including a fixed effect of the within-subjects variable indicating the type of help being evaluated (volunteering vs. hands-on unpaid assistance), fixed effects for the covariates, and a random intercept of the participant.[19] The results revealed a significant main effect of type of help on perceived contribution to society (F = 20.12, p < .001) and perceived choice to help (F = 119.27, p < .001). Next, we probed the main effects with pairwise comparisons.

Again, supporting the confirmatory preregistered hypotheses, participants rated volunteering in general as more of a contribution to society and as reflecting more of a choice to help than hands-on unpaid assistance in general, as reported in Table 3.

Effect of Type of Help on Perceptions of Help Within Each Social Class Context

As in Studies 2–3, we conducted follow-up analyses to test if the effects of the type of help on perceptions of help were evident among participants from higher and lower social class contexts. These analyses were designated as exploratory in the preregistration and included analyzing both one's own help as well as help in general. We followed the same analytical approach for Studies 2–3 and repeated the linear mixed-effects models for each outcome only among participants in lower social class contexts and only among participants in higher social class contexts. The results show the

[19] In the preregistration, we planned to include a random slope for the type of help for these mixed models but remove the random slope for the type of help if the model with it does not converge. As with Studies 2 and 3, there is only one observation per participant per cell given the design, so the models with the random slope do not converge. Following the rationale for the models used in Studies 2 and 3, we do not include a random slope of the type of help.

Table 3
Helpers and People in General Perceived Volunteering as More of a Contribution and Reflecting More Choice Than Unpaid Assistance

Measure	$M_{Volunteer}$	M_{Unpaid}	*B*	*SE*	[95% CI]	*t*	*p*	R^2m	R^2c
Perceptions of own help									
Contribution to society	3.28	3.09	0.20	0.06	[0.07, 0.32]	3.11	.002	.17	.61
Choice	3.99	3.75	0.23	0.08	[0.09, 0.38]	3.12	.002	.03	.39
Perceptions of help in general									
Contribution to society	2.93	2.84	0.09	0.04	[0.02, 0.16]	2.54	.011	.08	.56
Choice	3.65	3.26	0.38	0.03	[0.32, 0.45]	12.28	<.001	.05	.61

Note. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

same pattern of effects was present for participants in higher and lower social class contexts for perceptions of one's own help as well as perceptions of help in general, with a few exceptions (see Supplemental Material for full reporting of simple effects).

For perceptions of one's own help, the simple effect for choice among participants in lower social class contexts did not reveal significant differences between volunteering and hands-on unpaid assistance to others. This may be due to a reduced sample size, as only people in lower social class contexts who reported engaging in both hands-on unpaid assistance and volunteering were included in the model ($n = 117$; compared to $n = 197$ for participants in higher social class contexts who report engaging in both of these forms of help). Thus, it is possible that these analyses were not well-powered enough to detect the effect size for these dependent variables only among participants in lower social class contexts. For perceptions of help in general, the simple effect for perceived contribution did not show a significant difference between volunteering and hands-on unpaid assistance among participants in lower social class contexts. In this case, power is not an issue, given that participants responded to this set of questions regardless of whether they reported engaging in help or not. Together, the results suggest the patterns of results are relatively consistent across participant social class contexts but that some participants in lower social contexts may possibly resist the model that bonding help is less of a contribution to others than bridging help, which is worthy of further exploration in future research.

Choice to Help Partially Mediated the Effect of the Type of Help on Perceived Contribution

Building on the pattern of results in Studies 2 and 3, we also conducted follow-up analyses listed as exploratory in the preregistration investigating whether the perceived choice to help mediated the effect of the type of help (i.e., volunteering vs. hands-on unpaid assistance) on perceived contribution to society. To do so, we conducted mixed mediation analyses with 1,000 simulations with perceived contribution to society as the primary outcome.

As expected, the perceived choice to help significantly mediated the effect of the type of help on the perceived contribution of participants' perception of their time spent volunteering and hands-on unpaid assistance (*indirect effect* = 0.09, 95% CI [0.03, 0.14], $p < .001$; *total effect* = 0.20, 95% CI [0.07, 0.33], $p = .002$) and help in general (*indirect effect* = 0.14, 95% CI [0.11, 0.17], $p < .001$; *total effect* = 0.09, 95% CI [0.02, 0.17], $p = .008$).

Discussion

Study 4's correlation design provided more evidence of the strength of the default model of social good—even those who engaged in help to close others perceived their help to distant others makes more of a contribution to society. As was found in Studies 2–3, help to distant others was perceived as more of a contribution than help to close others, for the most part, both by participants in higher and lower social class contexts. However, there was some evidence that the difference in perceptions of help may vary by participant social class context. Further, the difference in perceived contribution was driven partly by perceived choice—helping distant others reflected more choice to help than helping close others, which is part of the reason why help to distant others was perceived as making more of a contribution. Together, Study 4 replicates Studies 2–3 among people who themselves report engaging in hands-on help to close others, suggesting the pervasiveness and strength of the default model of social good that prioritizes help to distant others as the gold standard of contributing.

Study 5: Bridging Versus Bonding Help and the Social Class Disparity in Self-Perceived Contributing

Study 5 returned to the finding in Study 1 that people in lower social class contexts reported reduced feelings of social contribution. Here, we examined if differences in helping behaviors afforded by lower social class contexts and higher social class contexts can potentially explain this disparity given the default model of social good that prioritizes help to distant others over help to close others as found in Studies 2–4. To do so, we took advantage of a large, longitudinal, representative data set (MIDUS) with measures that reflect both bridging help (e.g., volunteering) and bonding help (e.g., unpaid assistance) as well as self-perceived social contribution. This three-wave data set allowed a robust test in a representative sample of whether bridging versus bonding help is related to feeling as though one contributes to society. We expected bridging help to be disproportionately less common in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts. However, we expected bonding help to *not* be disproportionately more common in higher social class contexts, either by being similarly practiced across social class contexts or by being disproportionately more practiced in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts. Further, we expected that bridging help to distant others (vs. bonding help to close others) would be more strongly associated with a sense of contribution to society and would explain more of the social class disparity in self-perceived social contribution.

Method

Participants

Study 5 used the random-digit-dialing subsample from MIDUS, a longitudinal national survey collected in three waves (Brim et al., 2020; Ryff et al., 2019, 2021). We limited the sample to participants who indicated their social class context (i.e., education) at Time 1 and who completed at least one of the outcome measures for at least one time point. Wave 1 was administered in 1995–1996 ($N = 3{,}001$, 70.24% people with high-school degrees or less education, 51.65% women, 86.07% White, $M_{age} = 47.05$ years, $SD_{age} = 13.13$). Wave 2 was administered in 2004–2006 ($N = 1{,}747$, 62.56% people with high-school degrees or less education, 54.78% women, 90.04% White, $M_{age} = 56.95$ years, $SD_{age} = 12.6$). Wave 3 was administered in 2013–2014 ($N = 1{,}136$, 59.33% people with high-school degrees or less education, 52.99% women, 88.56% White, $M_{age} = 64.81$ years, $SD_{age} = 11.34$; see Supplemental Material for more details of sample demographics).[20]

Measures

Participants completed measures of self-perceived social contribution, helping behaviors, and social class context as measured by education.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution. Self-perceived social contribution was measured at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 using the same scale in Study 1 ($\alpha_1 = .67$, $M_1 = 5.15$, $SD_1 = 1.27$; $\alpha_2 = .69$, $M_2 = 5.16$, $SD_2 = 1.23$; $\alpha_3 = .72$, $M_3 = 5.12$, $SD_3 = 1.24$).

Helping. Participants indicated how many hours per month they either volunteered or provided unpaid assistance to others. Because the distributions of responses were nonnormal, zero-inflated, and highly skewed, we followed the protocol of some past work using these variables (Chen et al., 2021; Fujiwara, 2009; Lee et al., 2019) and created an ordinal variable with three categories for each outcome: none, low, and high. For each variable at each wave, all responses of 0 were coded as "none" and a median split of the remaining data yielded the "low" and "high" cutoffs. See Supplemental Material for low versus high cutoffs for each variable at each wave.

Volunteering (to Distant Others). At Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3, participants answered the question "On average, about how many hours per month do you spend doing formal volunteer work of any of the following types?" which was summed across four types: (a) hospital, nursing home, or other health care-oriented work; (b) school or other youth-related volunteer work; (c) volunteer work for political organizations or causes; and (d) volunteer work for any other organization, charity, or cause. Responses of 0 hr accounted for 55%–61% of responses. Low volunteering ranged from 1 hr to 8–9 hr depending on the wave. High volunteering ranged from 9 to 10 hr and greater depending on the wave.

Unpaid Assistance to Close Others. At Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3, participants answered the question "On average, about how many hours per month do you spend providing unpaid assistance (such as help around the house, transportation, or childcare) to each of the following people?" for several groups. We summed the average monthly unpaid assistance of the four subgroups of close others: (a) your parents or the people who raised you, (b) your in-laws, (c) your grandchildren or grown children, and (d) any other family members or close friends. Responses of 0 hr accounted for 27%–34% of responses. Low unpaid assistance ranged from 1 hr to 11–14 hr depending on the wave. High unpaid assistance ranged from 12 to 15 hr and greater depending on the wave.

Social Class Context. Participants reported the highest level of education they completed at Time 1, with participants with less than a 4-year college degree designated as navigating lower social class contexts and participants with a 4-year college degree or more designated as navigating higher social class contexts.

Covariates. We included age, gender, race (dichotomized into participants who identify as White and participants who identify as Asian, Black, African American, Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, multiracial, or any other race/ethnicity listed), marital status (dichotomized into currently married vs. not currently married), and working status (currently working vs. not currently working) all measured at Time 1 as covariates in our analyses. Because marital status and working status may change over time, we included measures of these covariates at each time point. Covariate descriptive statistics are reported in the Supplemental Material.

Transparency and Openness

MIDUS research material documentation and data can be found through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. See Supplemental Material for more details on how to access the data files. The analysis code can be found on the Open Science Framework project page at https://osf.io/kys2m/. We used all available data from the three primary waves of MIDUS and report all data exclusions. We used *ordinal* (Version 2023.12.4; Christensen, 2019) to conduct ordinal mixed models. We conducted mediation models using *PROCESS for R* (Version 4.0.2; Hayes, 2017, 2021). Study 5's hypotheses and analysis plan were not preregistered.

Results

We examined the social class context disparity in self-perceived social contribution and social class context differences in helping behaviors, and then investigated if help to distant versus close others mediated this disparity. We report the results with covariates in the main text and without covariates in the Supplemental Material. All analyses are robust to dropping covariates unless otherwise stated.

Self-Perceived Social Contribution

First, we investigated a social class context disparity in self-perceived social contribution across the three waves of data, expecting participants in lower social class contexts to report reduced feelings of self-perceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts, as reported in earlier research and found in Study 1. We conducted a mixed-effects model with a fixed effect of participant social class context, a random intercept of the participant, and fixed effects for time and the covariates.

[20] The MIDUS samples are well-powered—estimating a small effect ($r = .1$) at 99% power requires 1828 participants. Study 5's cumulative sample size is $N = 3{,}001$, which is well above the power requirement.

As in Study 1, participants in lower social class contexts reported lower self-perceived social contribution than participants in higher social class contexts; averaged effect: $M_{\text{Lower social class contexts}} = 4.89$; $M_{\text{Higher social class contexts}} = 5.64$; $B = -0.75$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.83, −0.67]; $t = -17.45$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .10$, $R^2c = .55$. See also Figure 5.

Helping Behaviors Differ by Social Class Context

We conducted mixed-effects models mirroring those assessing the social class context disparity in self-perceived social contribution to assess differences in helping behaviors, specifically volunteering and providing unpaid assistance to close others. Because the helping behavior measures were coded into three levels (none, low, and high), we conducted ordered logistic mixed regression models to account for the ordinal nature of the outcome.

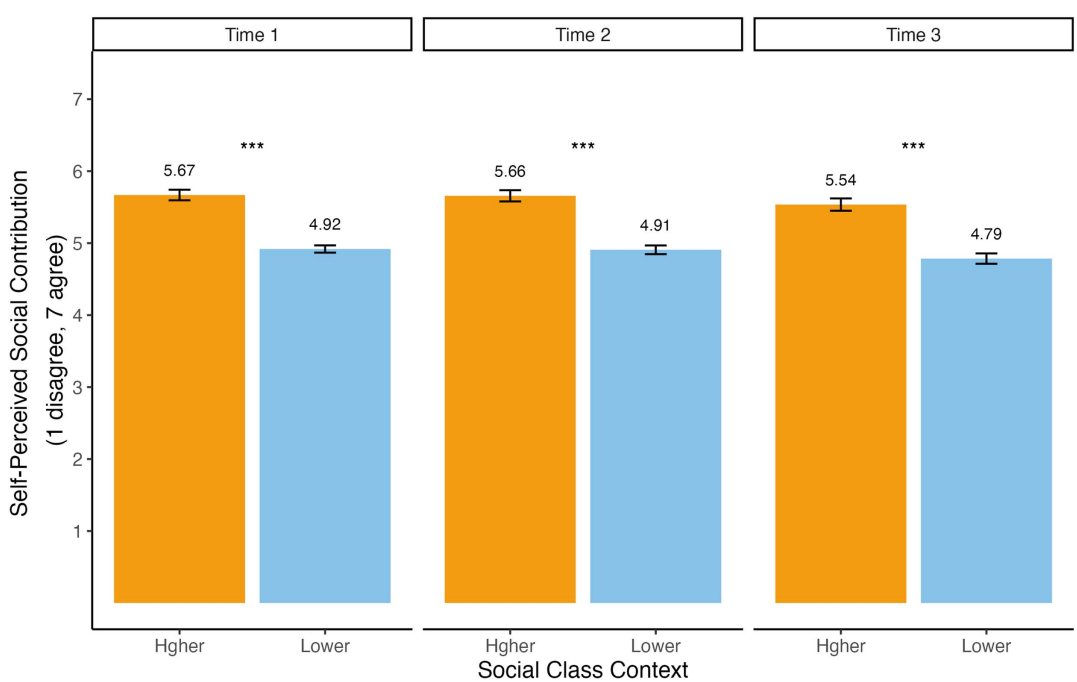
As expected, participants in lower social class contexts spent less time volunteering (to distant others) compared to participants in higher social class contexts ($B = -1.37$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [−1.57, −1.18], $z = -13.58$, $p < .001$). However, participants in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts spent more time providing unpaid assistance to close others ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.54], $z = 5.52$, $p < .001$).

Helping Behaviors Differentially Associated With Self-Perceived Contribution

Given the social class context differences in helping behaviors, we next investigated if helping behaviors (e.g., bridging and bonding help) were differentially related to self-perceived social contribution. We conducted an additional mixed-effects model with fixed effects for the ordinal measure of time spent volunteering, the ordinal measure of time spent providing unpaid assistance, and participant social class context along with a random intercept of the participant and fixed effects for time and the covariates.

The results showed a positive, linear relationship between volunteering and self-perceived social contribution ($B = 0.49$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.43, 0.55]; $t = 16.58$, $p < .001$, $R^2m = .16$, $R^2c = .54$). The model results also showed a positive, linear relationship between providing unpaid assistance for close others and self-perceived social contribution ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.15]; $t = 3.43$, $p < .001$). However, the magnitude of the effect of unpaid assistance was smaller than the effect of volunteering. Specifically, the 95% CIs for volunteering did not overlap with the 95% CIs for unpaid assistance, suggesting that volunteering had a significantly stronger relationship with self-perceived social contribution than providing unpaid assistance did.

Figure 5
Consistent Social Class Disparity in Self-Perceived Social Contribution From Participants Sampled Longitudinally



Note. Participants in lower social class contexts reported lower self-perceived social contribution at Time 1 ($B = -0.79$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [−0.88, −0.69]; $t = -15.97$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$), Time 2 ($B = -0.72$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [−0.84, −0.61]; $t = -12.03$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$), and Time 3 ($B = -0.62$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [−0.76, −0.47]; $t = -8.20$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .09$). Bars represent the estimated marginal means from the mixed models. Error bars represent the 95% CI. SE = standard error. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
*** $p < .001$.

Helping Behaviors Differentially Mediate the Self-Perceived Contribution Disparity

Next, we aimed to further understand the role of bridging and bonding help and their relationship to self-perceived social contribution by leveraging mediation analyses. Specifically, we tested if bridging help and bonding help differentially mediated the social class disparity in self-perceived contribution. In other words, we aimed to understand if bridging and bonding help differentially explain why Americans in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts, on average, report lower levels of self-perceived social contribution.

We conducted a parallel mediation model for each time point using Model 4 in PROCESS for R with 10,000 simulations and considered the indirect effect to be significant if the 95% CIs did not overlap with zero. To the best of our knowledge, PROCESS for R cannot manage multilevel data (e.g., across all three time points), so we present the mediation analyses for Time 1 here and report Time 2 and Time 3 in the Supplemental Material along with a series of secondary analyses (e.g., mediations with the raw mediator variables despite their skewed distribution).[21]

Figure 6 reports the parallel mediation results at Time 1. Participants in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts reported lower levels of self-perceived social contribution, less time volunteering, and more time providing unpaid assistance to close others. Both volunteering and providing unpaid assistance to close others were positively associated with feeling as though one meaningfully contributes to the world, however, only the effect for volunteering reached standard thresholds for significance. Further, volunteering significantly mediated the effect of social class on self-perceived social contribution but unpaid assistance to close others did not. Notably, the 95% CI of the estimated difference between the two indirect effects (i.e., the indirect effect of volunteering minus the indirect effect of unpaid assistance to close others) did not overlap with 0, revealing that volunteering mediated significantly more of the observed association between participant social class contexts than unpaid assistance to close others did.

In sum, volunteering was more strongly related to self-perceived social contribution than providing unpaid assistance to close others was. Further, volunteering more strongly mediated the effect of social class on self-perceived social contribution. This pattern of findings suggests that how much someone volunteers (or not) is more closely linked to feeling as though one contributes something meaningful to the world and the social class disparity in self-perceived contribution than one's efforts providing unpaid assistance to close others. We interpret the cross-sectional mediation analyses as correlational, not causal. They provide some evidence that different ways of helping others may be one reason that Americans in lower social class contexts feel like they contribute less to society despite the objective help that many provide to their families, communities, and society.

Discussion

Building on the default model of social good that prioritizes bridging help to distant others versus bonding help to close others found in Studies 2–4, Study 5 provided some evidence that differences in bridging versus bonding help partially explained why people in lower social class contexts have reduced feelings of contribution. Specifically, the findings suggest that some of the types of help that are disproportionately more common in higher social class contexts (i.e., bridging help; e.g., volunteering) and are also perceived by others and helpers themselves as more of a contribution to society (as found in Studies 2–4) were more strongly linked to one's sense that they provide something of value to society. In contrast, some of the types of help that are *not* disproportionately more common in higher social class contexts (and in the case of this data set here, are actually often disproportionately more common in lower social class contexts) and are also perceived by others and helpers themselves as less of a contribution to society (as found in Studies 2–4) were not as strongly linked to one's own sense of contributing. While Study 5's data and correlational analyses offer a zoomed-out view of the psychological processes at play that are worthy of more fine-grained analyses in future work, they offer additional evidence that bridging help to distant others is more valued as a contribution to society than bonding help, and that this difference is related to the social class disparity in a sense of contributing to society.

General Discussion

In her analysis of White working-class Americans, Joan Williams asserts, "when you leave the two-thirds of Americans without college degrees out of your vision of the good life, they notice" (Williams, 2017, p. 129). The current set of studies found empirical support for this claim and provided evidence for one potential source of this disparity: When it comes to feeling that you have made a contribution to your community or society, caring for a family member does not equal volunteering to help a stranger. First, using multiple methods, the current research found that Americans in lower, compared to higher, social class contexts continue to report reduced perceived social contribution. This is an enduring social class disparity that also extends to metaperceptions. Second, probing one potential source of the disparity, two experiments and a correlation study found that bridging help to distant others was perceived as more of a contribution to society than bonding help to close others, in part, because bridging help reflects greater perceived choice to help. Third, Study 5 found that differences in engaging in forms of bridging and bonding help were related to the social class disparity in perceived contributions. Taken together, the current research provides support for the hypothesis that the forms of help more accessible and common in higher (vs. lower) social class contexts are perceived as more of a contribution to society.

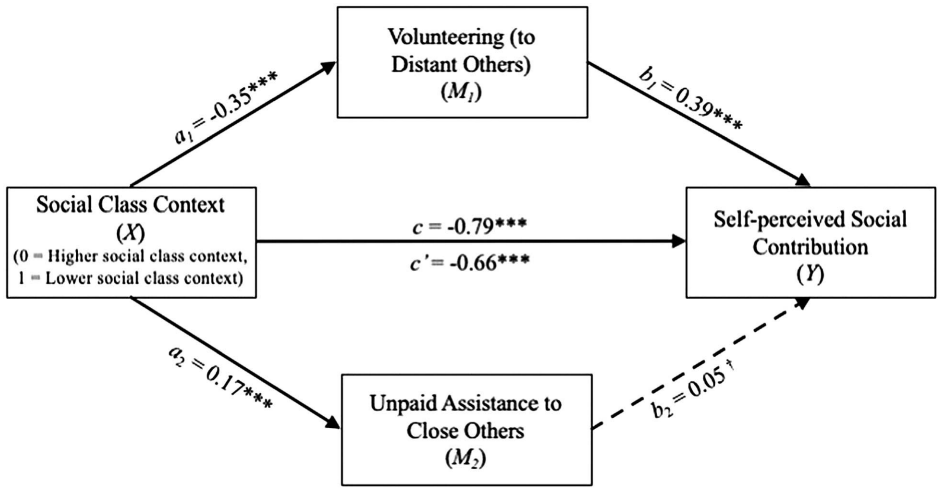
Theoretical Contributions

This initial series of studies makes three distinct contributions to the literature on social class inequality, status hierarchy, and prosocial behavior. First, they add to theory on the psychological consequences of inequality and expand the growing list of the consequences of social class inequality. We found evidence that in addition to having fewer material resources, less well-paid jobs,

[21] To the best of our knowledge, PROCESS for R cannot manage ordinal data at the present time, so the model presented here includes the ordinal helping behavior variables coded as numeric (i.e., none = 0, low = 1, high = 2). Supplemental analyses using the raw, numeric helping behavior variables are reported in the Supplemental Material and revealed a similar pattern of results.

Figure 6

Helping Behaviors Differentially Mediate the Self-Perceived Contribution Social Class Disparity



Note. See the main text for the description of model and covariates. The results show a significant indirect effect of volunteering ($B = -0.14$, $SE_{\text{boot}} = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [−0.17, −0.11]). The results do not reveal a significant indirect effect of unpaid assistance to close others ($B = 0.01$, $SE_{\text{boot}} = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.0007, 0.02]). Contrast between the indirect effects of help to distant others and help to close others: $B = -0.15$, $SE_{\text{boot}} = 0.02$, 95% CI [−0.18, −0.11]. SE = standard error.
† $p < .1$. *** $p < .001$.

and other forms of inequality, lower social class standing can be accompanied by being less likely to believe that one's life and everyday activities provide something of value to society and the sense that others' likely share this perception. We suggest here that this aspect of psychological inequality can compound the inequality of material resources. A focus on material needs often positions psychological needs (e.g., meaning, respect, recognition, dignity) as secondary, though lower income individuals tend to view material and psychological needs as equally important (Schroeder & Epley, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). Thus, attending to the psychological inequality faced by those in lower social class contexts is important in addition to much-needed efforts to address material-based inequalities. Further, believing one makes a meaningful contribution is important for well-being and health, even being associated with reduced risk for mortality, as well as for one's sense of belonging (Gruenewald et al., 2012; Keyes, 1998; Muragishi et al., 2024). Thus, a consistent, robust disparity in perceived contributions may play a role in exacerbating existing social class disparities across a variety of domains.

Second, the current research identifies in the U.S. American context a default model of social good which emphasizes bridging help to distant others rather than bonding help to close others as a possible source of this disparity. The capacity and opportunity to fulfill the standards set by the default model of social good have the potential to add to the accumulation of advantage experienced by those with more material resources and status and could aid in fostering a sense of contributing less among those who may necessarily contribute to others in ways that differ from the default model. People with more than sufficient material resources are more likely to navigate contexts in which the needs of close others in their networks are already met without their active participation and are thus best positioned to engage in bridging help (Rossi, 2001a).

The default model of social good may serve as an additional means of maintaining, reinforcing, and legitimizing the status hierarchy by conferring additional status to people in society who already have relatively more material resources, power, and influence. Further, the default model fails to fully recognize the family-oriented, private labor that is disproportionately more common and maintains community in lower (vs. higher) social class contexts. A sense of being valued in society has many sources and is the focus of multiple, often disparate literatures. It accrues, for example, through the cultural capital associated with one's family, paid labor, education, occupation, race, gender, and social class (for a recent conceptual and empirical overview, see Ridgeway, 2019; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). The current article investigated one potential link between helping others and the sense of feeling like a valued, contributing member of society. In doing so, we identified and analyzed an additional and relatively unexplored avenue through which social class status is recognized and maintained.

Third, the studies underscore the need to connect analyses of prosocial behavior, which often focus almost exclusively on helping strangers, to the growing literature on giving, as opposed to receiving, social support. Prosocial behavior is often broadly defined as "actions intended to benefit others" (Kassin et al., 2016, p. 412) but is most often operationalized as helping a stranger and other forms of bridging help. When help between close others is considered, as is the case with the literature on social support, the focus is often on the health and well-being benefits accrued by those receiving support and not on how support or help giving can serve as a form of moral action worthy of societal

respect (Inagaki & Orehek, 2017; with a few notable exceptions, e.g., Brown et al., 2003; Liang et al., 2001).

The current prevalence and growing need of caring for close others suggests the rich potential for enhancing the measurement, relevance, and applicability of theories of prosociality to consider more and diverse forms of social support and how they could be recognized as moral and worthy of respect. Recent surveys in the United States that focus on the aging American population (e.g., National Public Radio, 2023) refer to "a crisis of care" and suggest that meeting the mounting need for hands-on care may require increasing the value and moral significance of those who spend their time and much of their lives caring for close others. In many respects, a concern with how behaviors that are more common in lower social class contexts are not fully recognized reprises the classic debate between Gilligan and Kohlberg over different forms of morality. Gilligan observed that much of the work done for others such as caring and doing for others was overlooked in the analysis of moral behavior and typically undervalued because this type of work was performed in roles traditionally held by women (Gilligan, 1993; Kohlberg et al., 1983). The current work builds on this tradition by investigating the undervaluation of the types of help more accessible and common among the majority of the U.S. population (i.e., in lower social class contexts).

Limitations and Future Directions

These initial studies on the social class disparity in social contribution have important limitations. While Studies 2–4 provided evidence for the hypothesized default model, only Study 5's analyses connected feelings of contribution to participants' helping behavior and this study did not directly measure the default model of social good. Future work could assess a more immediate connection between people's helping behaviors and their overall sense of contributing to provide a closer test of the theory which could also help elucidate factors that shore up or instead counter the default model. Further, the experimental designs in Studies 2–3 identified a causal pathway between bridging and bonding help and *others'* perceptions of that help as a contribution. However, the correlational nature of Studies 4 and 5 leaves open questions of causality between how people value help and their *own* perceptions of whether they generally contribute to society. It is likely that connections between perceptions of help and how much one contributes are bidirectional, and it is possible that bridging help is perceived as more of a contribution to society than bonding help as a way to justify patterns of differential helping or one's higher status in society. Given that volunteering has been considered a form of status differentiation, it is likely that perceptions of how much help contributes to society can serve both as a means to maintain and also justify status hierarchies (Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2000). One way to address these questions in future work is to manipulate the default model of social good by, for example, reframing help to one's family as an equally important contribution as helping a stranger. Such a study could help determine whether the default model has a causal link to people's perceptions of how much they contribute to society.

Further, ways of helping others vary on many dimensions and the current set of studies systematically investigated only one factor (i.e., the recipient of help) among a specific way of helping (i.e., only time spent helping another person). The experiments show meaningful differences in the perception of help to distant versus close others while holding many variables constant, including the form, consistency, and duration spent helping others. Yet, future work can further investigate whether varying help along more dimensions affects the perceived contribution of such help. Specifically, considering help to nonhuman recipients, such as helping the environment (e.g., picking up trash, recycling), or groups of recipients versus specific individuals may provide insight into how dimensions of a recipient impact the perceived contribution of the action (Slovic, 2007; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Another common form of helping is through giving money, which is much more accessible for people in higher (vs. lower) social class contexts and ripe for further investigation (Macchia & Whillans, 2021; Meer & Priday, 2021). In addition to potentially serving as a justification for status, the default model of social good may reflect well-documented American notions of deservingness and of self-reliance. A reticence to credit help to close others as a valued contribution likely reflects a feeling that people who need assistance in older age should have taken better care of themselves or have purchased insurance to cover their care needs (Laenen & Roosma, 2022).

Another important limitation of the current investigation is that the studies controlled for race and gender but did not systematically investigate their role.[22] A focus on intersectionality and providing a full treatment of race and gender is necessary to fully answer the questions raised in the current studies. As an example, Americans of Color tend to engage in high rates of bonding help and community building regardless of their social class but may also face the stigmatizing perceptions that they contribute less to society than their White counterparts (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Hughes, 2001). Furthermore, bonding help is particularly prevalent among women whose caretaking roles require interdependent ways of being (AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020). However, women, on average, volunteer more than men do, suggesting that women may engage in both bridging and bonding forms of help (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Future work investigating the intersection of social class contexts with race and gender is critical to providing a more nuanced understanding of sociocultural variation in prosocial behavior.

Future work also stands to investigate social class, ways of helping, and perceptions of contributing outside of the U.S. national context. Whether the findings presented in this article are evident in other cultural contexts is an open empirical question. However, it is likely that other independent or individualistic cultures (e.g., many Western European contexts) that exhibit an emphasis on choice as a valuable and moral action that expresses one's volition and preferences may similarly devalue bonding help compared to bridging help due to its relative lack of perceived choice (Madan et al., 2020; Savani et al., 2008, 2010). Yet, the associations between choice, agency, and morality that are pervasive in the U.S. context are much less evident in many other parts of the world, such

[22] Additional analyses suggest inconsistent findings regarding the role of gender—women reported greater feelings of contribution than men in Study 1A, which is in line with prior literature (Keyes & Shapiro, 2004). In the MIDUS sample, the gender difference was only evident among people in higher social class contexts. Furthermore, the main MIDUS sample, as well as the Study 1A sample, is majority White and did not provide sufficient power to appropriately test for any differences by race in feelings of contribution. See Supplemental Material for details on analyses regarding gender and race.

as in more interdependent or collectivist contexts (e.g., East and South Asian contexts) where fulfilling one's duties, responsibilities, commitments, and obligations to family members and close others is the root source of virtue and morality (Miller & Bersoff, 1992; Miller et al., 2011; Shweder & LeVine, 1984).

Future research can also test if the default model assessed here through individual attitudes is reflected and promoted in common practices. If the default model of social good is pervasive, researchers should find evidence of it reflected in institutional practices and policies. For example, as colleges, universities, and employers evaluate candidates' experiences and background, what counts as valuable and diagnostic of future capacities—donating time to charities or caretaking for family members? Investigations into practices that reflect the default model could help elucidate what maintains and transmits the broader perception that help to distant others is more of a contribution than help to close others.

Conclusion

The current U.S. default model of social good is seemingly too narrow. It fails to fully recognize the social good generated by many Americans, and particularly those in lower social class contexts, through their everyday actions. Given that U.S. American culture emphasizes dignity and respect conferred through hard work (Bellah et al., 1985; Markus, 2017; Plaut et al., 2002; Weber, 2005), how one's contributions are valued in the American cultural context also serves as a signal of *who* is valued. If people need to earn their place by demonstrating they contribute, a limiting model of contribution has significant implications—it can affect how people value others and how people feel valued (Case & Deaton, 2015; Goldman et al., 2018; Williams, 2017). In the increasingly stratified U.S. society, the current work underscores the urgency of identifying, recognizing, and rewarding more diverse forms of social contribution.

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