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The social-class gap in negotiation: Lower-class individuals negotiate less and face more backlash

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Economic inequality has widened considerably in the United States and globally, raising pressing questions about the mechanisms that reproduce social stratification. One prominent manifestation of this inequality is the "class ceiling" in organizations: individuals from lower social classes earn less and advance more slowly than their higher-class counterparts, even with comparable credentials. We identify a crucial behavioral pathway contributing to this class ceiling: a social-class gap in the propensity to negotiate. We propose that lower-class individuals are less likely to initiate negotiations than their higher-class counterparts, a pattern that can compound economic disadvantage over time. Across four studies (total $N = 10,211$)—including a nationally representative sample of employees (Study 1), a sample of business school students (Study 2), a field study of an online labor market (Study 3), and a survey study of workplace negotiations and career outcomes (Study 4)—we find consistent evidence for this gap. This gap is partially explained by lower-class individuals' reduced sense of power and heightened concerns about social backlash. Additionally, Study 5 ($N = 1,133$) finds that such concerns may be justified: an experiment with human resources (HR) professionals shows that identical negotiation requests elicit stronger social backlash when initiated by lower-class (vs. higher-class) individuals. Together, these findings reveal a pernicious double bind for lower-class individuals: remaining silent perpetuates economic disadvantage, yet initiating negotiation exposes them to greater social penalties. Addressing this double bind is critical for ensuring that negotiation serves as a vehicle for upward mobility rather than a gatekeeper of privilege.

social class | negotiation | inequality | socioeconomic status | management

Significance

Economic inequality continues to widen in the United States and globally, yet the organizational processes that reproduce social stratification remain insufficiently understood. This research identifies negotiation propensity as a key behavioral pathway that exacerbates class disparities: lower-class individuals are less likely to initiate negotiations, a pattern associated with persistent inequalities in pay and advancement. Moreover, when lower-class individuals do negotiate, they face stronger social backlash than their higher-class counterparts. By revealing how negotiation can serve as both a barrier and a potential vehicle for mobility, this work highlights a critical and previously overlooked leverage point for reducing class inequality.

Over recent decades, economic inequality has widened substantially. In the United States, the top 1% of earners now receive a larger share of national income than the entire bottom 50% combined (1). Similar trends are evident globally: in most countries, income and wealth inequality have risen over the past three decades (2). As public concern about these widening gaps has intensified (3), a central question remains unresolved: through what mechanisms do modern institutions reproduce social stratification?

A growing body of research documents persistent disadvantages faced by individuals from lower social-class backgrounds, challenging meritocratic ideals—the notion that outcomes reflect merit alone. For example, even with comparable credentials, individuals from lower social classes are less likely to be hired into prestigious or mainstream professions (4–7). Among those who do secure such positions, they still earn less (8, 9) and encounter a "class ceiling" that constrains advancement into leadership roles (10). Despite extensive evidence of these disparities, the organizational processes that generate and sustain them remain insufficiently understood.

To explain these disparities, we turn to a powerful yet underexamined social process: negotiation. Negotiation is a primary means through which individuals claim resources, advocate for their interests, and shape their personal and professional trajectories (11). In modern organizations, negotiation affects outcomes ranging from compensation and work arrangements to promotions into managerial and leadership roles (12–14). Thus, negotiation can serve as an engine of inequality: even a single decision to negotiate may accumulate into substantial long-term disparities. For instance, in a study of newly hired employees, those who chose to negotiate increased their starting annual salaries by an average of $5,000—an advantage that could translate into more than $600,000 in additional earnings over the course of a 40-y career (15). In another study conducted at a U.S. investment bank, employees who tended to negotiate were promoted, on average, 17 mo sooner than those who did not (16).

Given negotiation's consequential role in shaping economic prosperity and career advancement, differences in who negotiates may represent an important pathway through which inequality is produced and sustained (17–19). We propose that social class systematically influences individuals' propensity to negotiate, and that this class-based negotiation gap may

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perpetuate class disparities in workplace outcomes. Specifically, we posit that lower-class individuals are less likely to initiate negotiations than their higher-class counterparts, and that this lower propensity to negotiate is associated with subsequent economic disadvantage.

Explanatory Mechanisms: Sense of Power and Concerns about Social Backlash

To understand the emergence of this class-based negotiation gap, we distinguish between structural and psychological accounts. From a structural perspective, class differences in negotiation propensity may arise from the uneven distribution of negotiable opportunities. Occupations or career paths more common in lower-class contexts often feature more rigid compensation structures and work arrangements that may preclude the possibility of negotiation (20). Over time, reduced exposure to such negotiation opportunities may limit familiarity with negotiation and lower individuals' propensity to initiate negotiations.

Although this structural account may explain part of the class-based variation, it remains unclear whether it fully accounts for the differences in negotiation propensity. Therefore, we also consider psychological mechanisms that may shape individuals' propensity to negotiate. Prior research highlights two theoretically grounded psychological constructs that systematically vary by social class and may therefore serve as mechanisms linking social class to negotiation propensity: *sense of power*, defined as the belief in one's ability to control outcomes for oneself and others (21), and *concerns about social backlash*, defined as apprehension about negative social consequences for behaviors that violate prevailing norms (22).

The first mechanism involves individuals' *sense of power*. A substantial body of research demonstrates that power shapes whether and how individuals negotiate (23–25). In negotiation contexts, power can take many forms, such as having strong alternatives or superior information (26, 27). Yet beyond these structural sources of power, a psychological sense of power also plays a critical role. Individuals who believe they can influence outcomes are more likely to initiate negotiations, approach them more proactively and confidently, and remain less constrained by their counterpart's perspectives during negotiations (23, 28).

Importantly, one's sense of power varies systematically by social class (21, 29). Higher-class environments, characterized by greater material resources and social capital, provide individuals with more opportunities to influence others and exert control over outcomes, thereby fostering stronger feelings of power and a belief that outcomes can be largely shaped by one's own actions (30). By contrast, lower-class environments are often marked by heightened constraint and uncertainty in daily life (e.g., financial insecurity, unemployment), which can foster the belief that outcomes are driven more by external forces than by personal agency (31, 32). Consequently, lower-class individuals may be less likely to initiate negotiations than their higher-class counterparts because they enter these interactions with a diminished sense of power.

The second mechanism involves *concerns about social backlash*. Beyond shaping individuals' perceived ability to advocate for their own interests, social class may also shape beliefs about the appropriateness of doing so. Lower-class environments, characterized by systematic instability and limited safety nets, tend to foster interdependent norms that emphasize cooperation, harmony, and attentiveness to others' needs (33, 34; but see also ref. 35). These norms influence how people navigate social interactions, encouraging more relationally attuned and cautious forms of self-expression (31, 36, 37). Because negotiation often requires assertive self-advocacy, it may violate these interdependent norms and therefore be perceived as socially inappropriate. Thus, even when lower-class individuals recognize opportunities to negotiate, they may refrain from doing so out of concern that they will be perceived as selfish, demanding, or uncooperative. Taken together, we propose that the class gap in negotiation is shaped jointly by differences in individuals' sense of power and concerns about social backlash.

If lower-class individuals are more concerned about social backlash from initiating negotiations, do they actually experience such backlash in practice? In other words, are these concerns primarily misperceptions, or do they reflect systematic evaluative penalties faced by lower-class negotiators? Distinguishing between anticipated and actual backlash is crucial for identifying effective interventions. If lower-class individuals overestimate the social costs of negotiating, then interventions that correct these misperceptions may help narrow the negotiation gap. Conversely, if lower-class negotiators do in fact encounter greater backlash, then efforts that merely encourage negotiation—without addressing evaluators' biases—may inadvertently exacerbate their challenges. Therefore, directly comparing the backlash faced by lower- vs. higher-class negotiators can clarify the source of the barrier and inform more targeted interventions.

Overview of Studies

Taken together, we propose that negotiation propensity differs by social class and that this negotiation gap perpetuates class disparities in workplace outcomes, including pay and advancement. We argue that lower-class individuals' lower propensity to negotiate may stem from two psychological mechanisms: a diminished sense of power and heightened concerns about social backlash. To further unpack the nature of barriers to negotiation, we empirically test whether identical negotiation behavior elicits stronger social backlash when initiated by lower-class (vs. higher-class) individuals.

We employed a multimethod approach to examine the social-class gap in negotiation across five studies (Table 1). Study 1 provides initial evidence of a class gap in negotiation propensity using a nationally representative sample of Australian workers across a wide range of industries. Study 2 demonstrates the generalizability of this class gap among a sample of Master of Business Administration (MBA) students in the United States. Study 3 offers behavioral evidence from an online labor market, showing that lower-class individuals are less likely to initiate negotiations even when explicitly

Table 1. Overview of Studies 1 to 5

Study	Sample	Main predictors	Tested outcomes
1	7,883 Australian employees	Educational attainment	Pay negotiation; Wage
2	634 U.S. MBA students	Parental educational attainment	Starting salary negotiation; Starting salary
3	699 U.S. adults	Composite social class	Bonus negotiation
4	995 U.S. full-time workers	Composite social class	Workplace negotiation; Subjective negotiation propensity
5	1,133 U.S. HR professionals	Candidate social class; Negotiation	Hiring judgment

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given the opportunity to do so. Study 4 documents class differences in negotiation propensity across multiple work outcomes—including salary, promotion, and job content—and directly tests the proposed psychological mechanisms: sense of power and concerns about social backlash. Finally, Study 5 examines whether lower-class negotiators experience greater social backlash than higher-class negotiators.

Given that social class is a multidimensional construct, scholars have assessed it using both objective indicators (e.g., income, educational attainment) and subjective indicators (e.g., subjective social status) (38–40). Although conceptually distinct, these indicators show meaningful convergence: a meta-analysis reports moderate correlations between objective and subjective indicators of social class (41), and a recent large-scale replication of 35 social-class effects finds that different indicators typically yield convergent conclusions when predicting class-related outcomes (35).

To leverage this convergence while respecting the multidimensional nature of social class, we adopt a triangulation strategy across Studies 1 to 4. In Studies 1 and 2, measurement is limited to the objective indicators available in the archival datasets. In Studies 3 and 4, we incorporate well-validated objective and subjective indicators of both current class status and class origin to more fully capture the breadth of the construct. Finally, we synthesize results across studies and operationalizations in a meta-analysis to assess the robustness of the observed associations between social class and negotiation propensity. This multimeasure, multistudy approach strengthens the reliability and generalizability of our conclusions regarding social-class differences in negotiation propensity.

The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Stanford University (Protocol #6325). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. All studies, except Study 1 (which used archival data), were preregistered. In addition to the primary social-class measure reported in each study, we present full results for all available social-class indicators in *SI Appendix*. All preregistrations, materials, publicly shareable datasets,* and analysis code are publicly available at osf.io/ajr6b.

Study 1

In Study 1, we used a nationally representative survey from the Australian Workplace Relations Study (the AWRS; 42) to examine whether negotiation propensity differs by social class and whether this negotiation gap mediates class-based differences in economic outcomes. The sample consisted of 7,883 employees (57.3% female; M_{age} = 40.45, SD = 12.57; 35.6% with a college degree or higher) drawn from 1,383 Australian companies spanning a wide range of industries and firm sizes. Most respondents (93.4%) held permanent or ongoing positions (vs. fixed-term contracts or other arrangements) with their current employer.

Measures.

Social class. The AWRS included two indicators of social class: educational attainment and wage. We focused on educational attainment as our primary operationalization of social class because wages may partly reflect negotiation outcomes, whereas educational attainment is a relatively stable and widely used objective indicator of individuals' structural position in the social hierarchy (39, 41). Respondents reported the highest level of education that they had completed (0 = have not completed any education, 7 = postgraduate degree). At the same time, we recognize that educational attainment is an imperfect proxy for social class, as it may also capture human capital and earning potential, which could independently influence negotiation behavior. Accordingly, we interpret Study 1 as providing initial evidence of a class-based negotiation gap and address this limitation through complementary operationalizations in subsequent studies.

Negotiation propensity. We operationalized negotiation propensity as a binary indicator of whether respondents negotiated their pay at the initial pay-setting stage (1 = negotiated pay, 0 = did not negotiate pay). Overall, 42.8% of the respondents reported negotiating their starting pay.

Wage. We measured economic outcomes using respondents' hourly wage. Respondents reported their total wage (before tax, in Australian dollars) for their most recent pay period and the number of hours for which they were paid. Hourly wage was calculated by dividing the total reported wage by the reported hours worked.

Control variables. In terms of demographic variables, we controlled for gender, age, total years in paid employment (1 = less than 1 y, 7 = 20 y or more), and whether English was their native language. In terms of employment characteristics, we controlled for employment status (permanent/ongoing, fixed-term contract or other arrangements), weekly work hours, and employee tenure (for analyses of wage).

Results.

Class differences in negotiation propensity. *SI Appendix*, Table S1 presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. We tested whether social class predicted negotiation propensity using a cross-classified multilevel logistic regression, with individual employees' responses (Level 1) nested within both companies (Level 2) and occupations (Level 2). This approach allowed us to account for variation in baseline negotiation likelihood across companies and occupations. Relative to lower-class individuals, higher-class individuals were more likely to have negotiated their starting pay [*SI Appendix*, Table S2 Model 1: odds ratio (OR) = 1.14, SE = 0.02, $P < 0.001$], an effect that remained robust after controlling for demographic and employment characteristics (*SI Appendix*, Table S2 Model 2: OR = 1.15, SE = 0.03, $P < 0.001$). To address the possibility that class differences in negotiation simply reflect sorting into occupations with varying negotiation opportunities, we also conducted within-occupation analyses across the 10 most common occupations, which varied substantially in their baseline negotiation rates (ranging from 7% to 67%). Despite this variation, the association between higher social class and negotiation propensity remained positive across all occupations (*SI Appendix*, Table S4), suggesting that occupational sorting is unlikely to fully account for the class differences in negotiation.

Negotiation propensity and the class wage gap. Negotiation propensity was associated with tangible economic returns: employees who negotiated their starting pay earned higher wages [*SI Appendix*, Table S3 Model 2: B = 39.80, SE = 12.64, $t(4{,}347.74) = 3.15$, $P = 0.002$]. We next tested whether negotiation propensity was associated with the broader link between social class and wage using Bayesian multilevel mediation analyses that nested employees' responses (Level 1) within companies (Level 2) and occupations (Level 2). Results indicated a significant indirect relationship between social class and wage via starting pay negotiation (*indirect effect* = 5.50, 95% credible interval = [1.93, 9.91]). In other words, lower-class individuals exhibited a lower propensity to negotiate, which was in turn associated with receiving lower wages than higher-class individuals.

*We are unable to share data from Studies 1 and 2 due to their proprietary nature. The AWRS data used in Study 1 can be requested through the Fair Work Commission, Australia: https://www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/reporting-and-publications/research/australian-workplace-relations-study. Data from the other studies are posted on OSF.

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Study 2

Study 2 examines whether social-class origin is associated with negotiation propensity even among individuals who share the same elite institutional context. This study also addresses a limitation of Study 1, which relied on educational attainment as a proxy for social class and may therefore conflate social class with correlated factors such as ability or professional training.

To provide a more rigorous test of our theoretical perspective, we conducted a field study with students in the MBA program at a leading U.S. business school who had recently accepted full-time job offers in the United States. This setting provides a relatively controlled context: participants were highly similar in education, credentials, and work experience, and they negotiated in broadly comparable job contexts. At the same time, they varied in social-class origin, allowing us to examine the effects of social-class origin. We tested the hypothesis that individuals from lower-class origins would be less likely to initiate salary negotiations, which would be associated with lower starting salaries. We also examined whether individuals from lower-class origins were more likely to cite concerns about social backlash as a reason for not negotiating.[†]

Our sample consisted of full-time MBA students from four consecutive cohorts (Class Years 2017–2020) who completed an employment survey administered by the school's career development office. As preregistered, we excluded individuals who pursued alternative post-MBA paths (e.g., further education or entrepreneurship; N = 458), accepted non-U.S. job offers (N = 121), or accepted consulting positions (N = 284), as consulting roles typically involve standardized, nonnegotiable compensation structures (43). This yielded a final analytic sample of 634 students who accepted full-time positions as regular company employees in the United States (43.5% female; $M_{\text{age in graduation year}}$ = 29.6 y, SD = 1.92; 68.5% U.S. citizens). The final sample spanned a broad range of industries, including technology (39.3%), finance (30.9%), pharmaceuticals/healthcare/biotechnology (9.0%), manufacturing (6.6%), retail (6.2%), and other sectors (8.0%).

Measures.

Social-class origin. When applying to the MBA program, each student was required to indicate the educational attainment of their parents (1 = High school or below, 2 = College or associate degree, 3 = Master's degree, 4 = Doctoral degree). Consistent with prior research (44, 45), we operationalized class origin using the highest educational level attained by either parent.

Negotiation propensity. Participants reported whether or not they had negotiated their starting salary after receiving the initial offer (1 = Yes, 0 = No). About 57.8% of participants had negotiated their starting salary.

Starting annual salary. All reported salaries were adjusted to their equivalent values in 2022 U.S. dollars to account for inflation. To encourage accurate reporting, the survey assured respondents that their answers would be strictly confidential.

Reasons for not negotiating. Respondents who did not negotiate their salary answered a follow-up, check-all-that-apply question about their reasons (e.g., "It did not occur to me to negotiate," "I did not want to damage the relationship"). Consistent with our theorizing, we predicted that individuals from lower-class origins would be more likely to choose "I did not want to damage the relationship," consistent with heightened concerns about social backlash.

[†]We were unable to test the other proposed mechanism—sense of power, as it was not included as a response option for why graduates did not negotiate in the school's employment survey.

Control variables. We controlled for MBA grade point average (GPA), verbal and quantitative percentile scores on the requisite MBA admissions exam, age, gender, race, and citizenship status (U.S. vs. international). We also included job industry and graduation year fixed effects to account for unobserved industry-specific characteristics and time-varying conditions (e.g., macroeconomic fluctuations).

Results.

Class origin and negotiation propensity. *SI Appendix*, Table S5 shows descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. A logistic regression showed that MBA graduates from lower-class origins were less likely to negotiate starting salaries than those from higher-class origins (*SI Appendix*, Table S6 Model 1: OR = 1.45, SE = 0.10, $P < 0.001$). This effect was robust when we included the controls (*SI Appendix*, Table S6 Model 2: OR = 1.49, SE = 0.11, $P < 0.001$).

Negotiation propensity and the class salary gap. Negotiation propensity was associated with higher starting annual salaries (*SI Appendix*, Table S7 Model 2: B = 6,450.19, SE = 2,181.90, P = 0.003). On average, MBA graduates who did not negotiate earned $6,450 less in starting annual salary than those who did negotiate. As an illustrative calculation, assuming a standard annual salary raise of 5%, this initial gap would compound to approximately $779,000 over a 40-y career. Mediation analyses further indicated a significant indirect relationship between social-class origin and starting salary via negotiation propensity (without controls: *indirect effect* = 440.25, P = 0.02, 95% CI = [81.21, 1,219.60], proportion of total effect mediated = 23%; with controls: *indirect effect* = 451.36, P = 0.01, 95% CI = [125.96, 1,276.59], proportion of total effect mediated = 24%). Consistent with the preregistration, we also tested whether parental education directly predicted starting salary. This direct association was not statistically significant without controls (B = 1,962.96, P = 0.13) or with controls (B = 2,055.67, P = 0.11). These results suggest that in this relatively advantaged MBA sample, social-class origin was associated with starting salary indirectly through negotiation propensity rather than through a direct effect on salary itself. Individuals from lower-class origins were less likely to initiate salary negotiations, which was in turn associated with lower starting salaries.

Lower-class origins and concerns about social backlash. Relative to those from higher-class origins, those from lower-class origins were more likely to cite *concerns about social backlash* ("I did not want to damage the relationship") as a reason for not negotiating. Logistic regressions showed that higher-class origin negatively predicted concerns about social backlash (without controls: OR = 0.56, 95% CI = [0.32, 0.96], P = 0.03; with controls: OR = 0.45, 95% CI = [0.23, 0.85], P = 0.02). Individuals' class origin did not significantly predict any of the other reasons for not negotiating (all Ps > 0.25); these nonsignificant results were corroborated by Bayesian chi-square tests (all Bayes Factors $BF_{10} < 0.01$, thus strong evidence for the null). However, we were unable to test a mediation model (class origin → concerns about social backlash → propensity to negotiate) because only individuals who had not negotiated answered the question about why they had not negotiated.

Overall, Study 2's findings bolster our theoretical perspective by showing the association between social-class origin and negotiation propensity and by providing suggestive evidence that concerns about social backlash may be one psychological mechanism of this pattern, above and beyond factors such as ability and training.

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Study 3

Building on Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 examines social-class differences in negotiation behavior in a controlled setting, thereby addressing alternative explanations such as differences in negotiation opportunities, situational norms, task performance, and confidence in performance. Our final sample included 699 U.S. adults from Prolific (45.8% female; M_{age} = 35.24, SD = 12.73; 57.4% with a college degree or above). In terms of race, 73.5% identified as White, 11.6% as Asian,[‡] 6.7% as Black, 5.2% as multiracial, and 3.0% as another race.

Measures.

Social class. To capture the multidimensional nature of social class and mitigate single-indicator measurement error, we constructed a composite social-class index (α = 0.71) by averaging standardized scores of the following social-class indicators: a) educational attainment, b) income level, c) subjective socioeconomic status (46), and d) parental educational attainment (i.e., the mean of mother's and father's educational levels). For transparency, we report results for each class indicator in the Supporting Information (*SI Appendix*, Table S10).

Negotiation propensity. To assess negotiation propensity, participants first completed a simple task in which they guessed the items depicted in 12 drawings. Then, they were informed that they would receive a performance-based bonus ranging from $0.50 to $3 for completing the task.

Within 24 h of study completion, we sent each participant a private message via Prolific, stating: "Thank you for taking part in the study 'Guess the Drawing.' In the study, participants are asked to guess the items depicted in 12 drawings and can earn bonuses of up to $3. You will be paid the following bonus amount: $0.50. The exact payment is negotiable. Please reply to this message if you have any questions." Following prior research (47), we explicitly gave participants an opportunity to negotiate without disclosing their task performance or the criteria used to determine bonus amounts. We made this design choice because the platform norm on Prolific is to passively accept assigned bonuses; pilot data indicated zero negotiation attempts when the negotiation opportunity was not explicitly stated.

We monitored participants' messages for 7 d following the initial payment notification. Negotiation propensity was operationalized as whether participants explicitly requested a higher bonus amount. If a participant simply accepted the initial bonus amount or asked clarifying questions without requesting additional compensation, their response was coded as *No Negotiation*. Two researchers independently coded all messages and achieved high interrater reliability (Cohen's κ = 0.98). At the end of the 7-d period, participants who negotiated received their requested bonus amount (up to the $3 maximum), whereas those who did not negotiate received the $0.50 baseline amount. We debriefed all participants on the true purpose of the study, thanked them, and offered them the opportunity to withdraw their data in accordance with our IRB requirements.

Control variables. We controlled for participants' gender, age, and race. To account for potential confounds related to ability and confidence—factors linked to both class and negotiation (37)—we further measured and controlled for actual task performance (percentage of correct guesses, M = 80.93%) as well as perceived task performance (participants' estimates of their number of correct guesses, M = 83.93%).

[‡]We recognize the importance of distinguishing between different Asian subgroups theoretically and empirically (73), but the data were not sufficiently granular for such analyses.

Results. We received messages from 125 of the 699 participants (17.88%); 39 participants (5.58%) explicitly asked for a higher bonus amount (see *SI Appendix*, Table S8 for sample messages). To examine whether social class predicted negotiation propensity, we fitted a binomial logistic regression with social class as the predictor variable and negotiation behavior (1 = Negotiation, 0 = No Negotiation) as the outcome variable. Social class positively predicted negotiation propensity (*SI Appendix*, Table S9 Model 1 without controls: OR = 1.67, 95% CI = [1.06, 2.65], P = 0.03; *SI Appendix*, Table S9 Model 2 with controls: OR = 1.65, 95% CI = [1.04, 2.64], P = 0.03), indicating that higher-class individuals were more likely to negotiate for a higher bonus amount than lower-class individuals.

We considered two alternative explanations: Higher-class individuals negotiated more because they either a) performed better on the task or b) felt more confident about their performance (37). However, neither explanation was supported. Social class did not predict actual task performance (B = −0.005, SE = 0.07, P = 0.95) or perceived task performance (B = 0.06, SE = 0.08, P = 0.42). Furthermore, social class continued to predict a higher likelihood of negotiation after controlling for gender, age, race, and actual and perceived task performance (*SI Appendix*, Table S9 Model 3: OR = 1.65, 95% CI = [1.04, 2.64], P = 0.04). Together, these results provide behavioral evidence that lower-class individuals are less likely to negotiate than their higher-class counterparts, even when explicitly given the opportunity to do so.

Study 4

Study 4 examined the class negotiation gap across multiple work outcomes and the underlying psychological mechanisms. First, we tested whether lower-class individuals were less likely to initiate negotiations and whether this lower negotiation propensity was associated with lower pay and fewer promotions compared to higher-class individuals. Second, we examined the mechanisms underlying this class negotiation gap by testing two parallel mediators: a) *sense of power* and b) *concerns about social backlash*.

We recruited 995 U.S. full-time workers (40.1% female; M_{age} = 39.50, SD = 11.48; 64.8% with a college degree or above) to participate in the study. To enhance representativeness, we employed stratified sampling to match the sample's household income distribution with the 2021 U.S. household income distribution. In the final sample, 72.2% identified as White, 12.6% as Black, 6.6% as Asian, 5.5% as Hispanic or Latino, and 3.0% as another race.

Measures.

Social class. Consistent with Study 3, we measured social class using a composite measure that captures both class origin and current socioeconomic status. Specifically, we standardized and averaged three social-class indicators: a) educational attainment, b) subjective socioeconomic status (46), and c) parental educational attainment. We excluded income level from the composite measure, as salary negotiation and salary constituted part of the outcome variables in this study. For transparency, we also report results based on each class indicator in *SI Appendix*, Tables S11–S13.

Workplace negotiation behavior. We assessed workplace negotiation by asking participants whether they had negotiated for the following items in their current job (1 = Yes, 0 = No): a) initial salary, b) initial benefits package, c) promotion, d) salary raise, e) job content, and f) anything else.

Workplace negotiation outcomes. We also assessed the outcomes of workplace negotiations. To assess the outcome of starting salary negotiations, participants reported both the initial offer

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Table 2. Study 4: Multilevel logistic regressions predicting workplace negotiation behavior

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Composite social class	1.58*** (0.12)			
Subjective socioeconomic status		1.20*** (0.04)		
Educational attainment			1.24*** (0.05)	
Parental educational attainment				1.09** (0.03)
Male	1.15 (0.13)	1.15 (0.13)	1.17 (0.13)	1.21+ (0.14)
Age	1.06 (0.07)	1.06 (0.06)	1.05 (0.07)	1.10 (0.07)
Asian (vs. White)	0.99 (0.22)	0.98 (0.21)	1.02 (0.22)	1.05 (0.23)
Black (vs. White)	1.17 (0.19)	1.13 (0.18)	1.15 (0.19)	1.15 (0.19)
Latino (vs. White)	1.32 (0.30)	1.21 (0.28)	1.27 (0.29)	1.30 (0.30)
Other race (vs. White)	1.58 (0.48)	1.54 (0.47)	1.53 (0.46)	1.58 (0.48)
Company size	0.88* (0.05)	0.90+ (0.05)	0.90* (0.05)	0.93 (0.05)
Job tenure	1.28*** (0.08)	1.25*** (0.07)	1.31*** (0.08)	1.27*** (0.08)
Alternative offer	1.61*** (0.23)	1.63*** (0.23)	1.60*** (0.23)	1.70*** (0.24)
Industry fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Akaike Information Criterion	5,317.01	5,365.73	5,332.44	5,390.41
Bayesian Information Criterion	5,549.93	5,598.95	5,565.44	5,623.62
Log Likelihood	−2,623.50	−2,647.86	−2,631.22	−2,660.20

Note: Coefficients are odds ratios. *OR*s > 1 indicate positive effects. SEs are in parentheses. $^{+}P < 0.10$, $^{*}P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$.

received and the final salary offer obtained. We excluded 9.8% of responses that did not report an annual salary (e.g., reporting "I don't remember") or implausible values indicative of data entry errors (e.g., reporting an initial offer of "30,000" and a final offer of "300,000"). Salary change was operationalized as the difference between the final and initial salary offers. To assess the outcomes of negotiations for promotion and salary raise, participants indicated whether they had ever gotten a promotion or salary raise in their current job (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

Subjective propensity to negotiate[§]. In addition to objective reports of negotiation initiation, we assessed participants' subjective experiences related to their negotiation propensity using the Propensity-to-Initiate-Negotiation (PIN) scale (α = 0.87) (48). We focused on three dimensions that captured psychological tendencies relevant to one's willingness to initiate negotiations: *recognition of negotiation opportunity* (5-item; e.g., "It is possible to make things better for myself by simply asking for what I want"), *entitlement* (3-item; e.g., "I think situations should be changed to fit my desire"), and *negotiation apprehension* (5-item; e.g., "It always feels so unpleasant to have to ask for things for myself"). We reverse-coded negatively worded items such that higher scores indicate a greater subjective propensity to negotiate.

Sense of power. We used Anderson et al.'s 8-item scale to measure participants' sense of power (α = 0.92) (21). Prior research using this scale has shown that higher social status is associated with a greater sense of power (21). An example item is "I think I have a great deal of power."

Concerns about social backlash. We adapted the social concerns subscale from the PIN scale (48) into a 5-item scale measuring the extent to which people were concerned that asking would damage their relationships and social image (α = 0.92; e.g., "If I ask for more, I may get punished for not being cooperative").

Control variables. Across analyses, we controlled for gender, age, and race. For analyses of workplace negotiation, we also controlled for job industry fixed effects, company size, whether participants had alternative offers (for analyses of negotiation at organizational entry), and job tenure (for analyses of postentry negotiation). All continuous covariates were standardized prior to analysis.

[§]We also used Sullivan et al.'s 8-item scale to measure self-efficacy in executing negotiation tactics (α = 0.91), as negotiation self-efficacy is a strong predictor of negotiation initiation behavior (74, 75). *SI Appendix*, Table S13 presents the predicted class differences in negotiation self-efficacy.

Results.

Social-class differences in initiating workplace negotiation. *SI Appendix*, Table S11 presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. We used a two-level logistic regression model with participants' negotiation responses on the six work outcomes (Level 1) nested within individuals (Level 2) to test the effect of social class on the propensity to negotiate in the workplace. Results demonstrated consistent class-based differences in initiating negotiation: Higher social class positively predicted a higher likelihood of negotiating for all outcomes examined (e.g., starting salary, benefits, promotion, salary raise, job content, and other items), controlling for demographic and employment characteristics (Table 2 Model 1: *OR* = 1.58, 95% CI = [1.36, 1.84], $P < 0.001$). Each social-class indicator similarly predicted a higher likelihood of negotiating (Table 2 Models 2 to 4).

When examining each work outcome individually (Fig. 1), we found that social class was positively associated with the likelihood of negotiating both starting salary (*OR* = 1.84, 95% CI = [1.46, 2.32], $P < 0.001$) and benefits package (*OR* = 1.38, 95% CI = [1.05, 1.83], $P = 0.02$) at the time of joining the company. After joining the company, higher social class was also positively associated with the likelihood of negotiating for promotion (*OR* = 1.45, 95% CI = [1.14, 1.85], $P = 0.003$), salary raise (*OR* = 1.47, 95% CI = [1.17, 1.84], $P < 0.001$), job content (*OR* = 1.38, 95% CI = [1.12, 1.71], $P = 0.002$), and other items (*OR* = 1.65, 95% CI = [1.09, 2.53], $P = 0.02$). These findings suggest that the association between social class and negotiation propensity is robust and persistent, extending beyond initial job entry and continuing throughout one's career progression.

Social-class differences in subjective propensity to negotiate. Social class was positively associated with subjective propensity to negotiate, as measured by the PIN scale (*SI Appendix*, Table S12 Model 1: *B* = 0.19, *SE* = 0.04, $P < 0.001$). Each social-class indicator, except parental education, similarly predicted higher subjective propensity to negotiate (*SI Appendix*, Table S12 Models 2 to 5).

Negotiation and class differences in workplace outcomes. Negotiation decisions were associated with substantial economic returns and career advancement. Participants who negotiated starting

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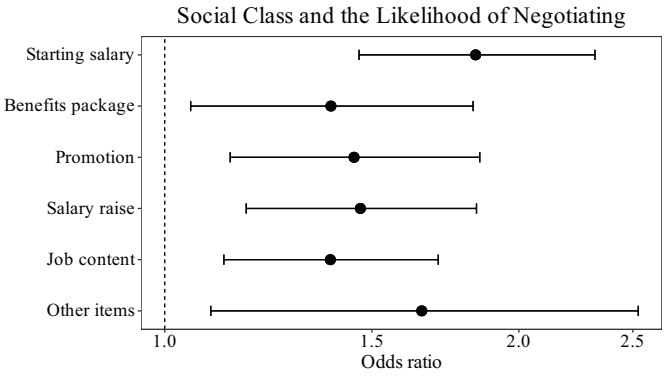


Fig. 1. Study 4: Higher social class predicts greater odds of negotiating across work domains. Note: Odds ratios > 1 indicate positive effects. Error bars represent 95% CI.

salary secured significantly larger salary increases than those who did not (B = 3,878.48, SE = 604.93, P < 0.001), corresponding to an average gain of $3,878.48 per year. Bayesian mediation analysis indicated a significant indirect relationship between social class and starting salary increases via negotiation (*indirect effect* = 2,110.47, 95% credible interval = [1,131.56, 3,431.98], proportion of total effect mediated = 66.07%).

Negotiation was also strongly associated with career advancement. Participants who negotiated for promotion were significantly more likely to obtain one (OR = 19.01, 95% CI = [10.15, 39.80], P < 0.001): about 95% of participants who negotiated were promoted, whereas only 48% of those who did not negotiate were promoted. Mediation analyses indicated a significant indirect relationship between social class and promotion outcomes via negotiation (*indirect effect* = 1.17, 95% credible interval = [0.41, 2.07], proportion of total effect mediated = 71.59%).

Last, a similar pattern emerged for salary raises. Participants who negotiated for a raise were significantly more likely to obtain one (OR = 6.51, 95% CI = [3.42, 13.79], P < 0.001). Negotiation mediated the relationship between social class and salary raise attainment (*indirect effect* = 0.73, 95% credible interval = [0.29, 1.34], proportion of total effect mediated = 65.42%).

Taken together, these results suggest that the negotiation gap represents an important behavioral pathway through which social-class inequalities may be reproduced and exacerbated.

Sense of power and concerns about social backlash as potential mechanisms of class differences in negotiation propensity. We examined the psychological processes associated with negotiation reticence among lower-class individuals by testing a) *sense of power* and b) *concerns about social backlash* as parallel mediators of the relationship between social class and each of the negotiation propensity measures. As shown in *SI Appendix*, Table S14, sense of power and concerns about social backlash simultaneously mediated social-class differences in workplace negotiation (total mediated effect = 0.12, 95% credible interval = [0.12, 0.13]) and subjective negotiation propensity (total mediated effect = 0.19, 95% credible interval = [0.14, 0.24]). This finding indicates that lower-class individuals' greater reticence to negotiate may reflect a combination of diminished sense of power and heightened concerns about incurring social backlash.

Aggregating across Measures and Studies 1 to 4

To assess the robustness of the link between social class and negotiation propensity, we conducted a meta-analysis aggregating observed associations between all social-class indicators and negotiation measures across Studies 1 to 4. The analysis revealed a significant overall positive association between social class and negotiation propensity (r = 0.12, SE = 0.02, P < 0.001, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.17]), indicating a stable class negotiation gap across different operationalizations of social class and negotiation.

Study 5

Given that lower-class individuals refrain from negotiation in part due to heightened concerns about social backlash, Study 5 investigates whether these concerns are grounded in reality—specifically, whether lower-class individuals indeed incur greater social costs for negotiating than their higher-class counterparts. Drawing on existing theories and empirical evidence, we develop two competing predictions regarding how a negotiator's social class may shape the consequences of initiating negotiation.

One possibility is that lower-class negotiators face greater social costs than their higher-class counterparts because negotiation violates prescriptive expectations associated with the lower class. Lower-class individuals are commonly stereotyped as cooperative and nonassertive (49–51). When lower-class individuals initiate negotiations to advance personal interests, they may be perceived as violating these stereotype-based prescriptive expectations; such violations are expected to elicit social backlash (52, 53). This mirrors well-documented backlash against women and African Americans when negotiating in ways that violate group-based expectations of communality (22, 54–56).

Conversely, emerging research suggests a potential negotiation advantage for lower-class individuals. Initiating negotiation can serve as a signal of socially desirable traits such as competence and agency (53, 57). Research on positive expectancy violations suggests that individuals who counter negative stereotypes in positive ways may be evaluated more favorably than those who simply conform to stereotypical expectations (58, 59). Since lower-class individuals are often stereotyped as less competent and less agentic (7, 49), initiating a negotiation represents a direct challenge to these stereotypes. This positive expectancy violation may prompt a cognitive reevaluation, leading evaluators to perceive the negotiator as especially agentic or competent for exceeding the expectations of their social position.

Study 5 tested these two competing possibilities by comparing the social costs of the same negotiation behavior for lower- vs. higher-class negotiators. To enhance external validity, we used Centiment, a professional survey panel, to recruit organizational decision-makers whose main job responsibilities were in recruiting, hiring, or human resources. The final sample consisted of 1,133 HR professionals residing in the United States (74.1% female; M_{age} = 41.04, SD = 9.68). 80.1% identified as White, 11.1% as Black, 6.4% as Asian, and 2.4% as another race.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Candidate Social Class: Higher vs. Lower) × 2 (Candidate Negotiation: Negotiation vs. No Negotiation) between-subjects design and were asked to evaluate a fictitious male job candidate. Participants reviewed a résumé and an interview transcript that manipulated the candidate's social class and whether the candidate negotiated. The résumé depicted a candidate applying for a Marketing Associate position—a mainstream occupation chosen to reflect a common professional context. The interview transcript included the candidate's responses to two questions: "Who is your role model?" and "Is there anything else you would like us to keep in mind as we consider your placement?"

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Candidate Social-Class Manipulation. Following prior research (5, 7), we manipulated the candidate's social class using a combination of implicit class cues embedded in the résumé and explicit mentions of class origin in the interview transcript. Specifically, the résumé signaled upper- vs. lower-class origins through club memberships, hobbies, and family surnames. Table 3 presents all manipulation and baseline elements used in the résumés. The interview transcript further reinforced class origin by having the candidate describe his family background in response to the role-model question.

Candidate Negotiation Manipulation. We manipulated negotiation behavior via the candidate's response to the second interview question. In the *No Negotiation* condition, the candidate simply affirmed his availability for the role. In the *Negotiation* condition, the candidate affirmed his ability and then made an explicit request for improved compensation, stating: "…I have just one question. [*As the first person in my family to go to college*] (*Lower-Class* condition only), I did a lot of research about jobs along the way. After researching the compensation for the job, I understand that there is a range in terms of the salary that is offered for this position. Given my qualifications, I would ask that my salary be bumped from $80,000 to $100,000. I would also like to be eligible for an end-of-year performance bonus."

Measures. Participants then rated their likelihood of hiring the fictitious candidate (0 = Not at all likely, 10 = Extremely likely). In the *Negotiation* condition, they also rated their likelihood of conceding to the candidate's requests (0 = Not at all likely, 10 = Extremely likely) and reported their counteroffer to the salary request (ranging from $80,000 to $100,000).[¶] Participants also rated the candidate on four attributes: cooperativeness (α = 0.69, e.g., "cooperative"), demandingness (α = 0.92, e.g., "arrogant"), competence (α = 0.87, e.g., "knowledgeable"), and agency (α = 0.69, e.g., "self-assured"). These attributes were selected based on their theoretical relevance to negotiation processes and class-based stereotypes (7, 49, 60), as discussed above.

Table 3. Study 5: Summary of social-class signals and baseline items on résumés

	Higher-Class	Lower-Class
Last name	Cabot	Clark*
Clubs	Alpha Beta Kappa Fraternity,* Sailing club	First-generation student club, Soccer club*
Activities	Volunteer sailing instructor	Volunteer soccer coach*
Interests	Sailing, skiing, classical music	Soccer,* board games, country music
	Baseline items	
Work experience	• Digital Marketing Analyst Intern • "SHOP LOCAL" College Campaign	
Education	• Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing • California State University, Los Angeles • GPA: 3.90 (Top 5% of the program)	
Skills	• Experiences in paid acquisition and marketing strategies • Knowledge in marketing research • Experiences in sales and marketing • Strong communication skills	

*A relatively class-neutral item included as a counterpart to a more salient social-class cue in the other résumé condition.

Results. *SI Appendix*, Table S15 presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

To examine how perceptions of the candidate varied as a function of social class and negotiation, we regressed hiring judgments and ratings of competence, cooperativeness, agency, and demandingness on candidate social class, negotiation condition, and their interaction. Initiating negotiation showed significant main effects on these evaluative measures: it reduced perceived competence and cooperativeness, and increased perceived agency and demandingness (all Ps < 0.01).

Importantly, we observed a significant interaction between candidate social class and negotiation on perceived cooperativeness (B = −0.28, t = −2.20, P = 0.03). Although negotiation reduced perceived cooperativeness for both higher- and lower-class candidates, the penalty was significantly larger for the lower-class candidate ($M_{difference}$ = 0.96, 95% CI = [0.78, 1.14], $t(569)$ = 10.34, P < 0.001, d = 0.87) than for the higher-class candidate ($M_{difference}$ = 0.68, 95% CI = [0.50, 0.85], $t(560)$ = 7.57, P < 0.001, d = 0.64). This finding suggests that negotiation may be particularly costly for lower-class individuals, potentially because it is perceived as a greater violation of prescriptive expectations of cooperativeness associated with lower social class. No other interaction effects were significant (Ps > 0.10), suggesting that the effects of negotiation on perceived competence, agency, and demandingness did not differ by candidate social class.

To examine whether this asymmetric penalty on cooperativeness translated into downstream hiring consequences, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (Fig. 2). The moderated mediation index was significant (*SI Appendix*, Table S16 Model 1: index = −0.30, SE = 0.14, Z = −2.22, P = 0.03), indicating that the indirect effect of negotiation on hiring judgments via cooperativeness varied by candidate social class. Specifically, negotiation exerted a stronger negative indirect effect on hiring judgment via cooperativeness for the lower-class candidate (*indirect effect* = −1.02, SE = 0.11, Z = −9.46, P < 0.001) than for the higher-class candidate (*indirect effect* = −0.72, SE = 0.10, Z = −7.02, P < 0.001). This effect remained robust when controlling for other candidate attributes, including competence, agency, and demandingness (*SI Appendix*, Table S16 Model 2: index = −0.07, SE = 0.03, Z = −2.41, P = 0.02).

Taken together, these results suggest that the social costs of negotiation are unequally distributed: lower-class individuals face greater social backlash for negotiating than their higher-class counterparts, and this asymmetry is in turn associated with lower perceived hirability. Notably, the asymmetry is primarily reflected in evaluations of cooperativeness. Consistent with established stereotypes linking lower social class with greater cooperativeness (49, 50), one possible interpretation is that lower-class candidates are held to more stringent expectations of cooperativeness, such that initiating negotiation is seen as a greater violation of these expectations. At the same time, other considerations may also contribute to this asymmetry. For example, observers may perceive lower-class candidates as less qualified, less entitled to improved economic outcomes, or less justified in making salary demands, and may therefore view the same negotiation request as less appropriate or legitimate.

[¶]For the concession and counteroffer outcomes, we were unable to estimate a Class × Negotiation interaction because these measures were available only in the *Negotiation* condition. Within this condition, analyses revealed no significant differences as a function of candidate social class. These results are reported in *SI Appendix*.

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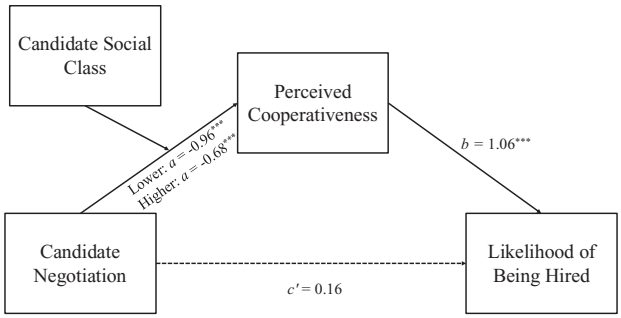


Fig. 2. Study 5: Candidate social class moderates the effect of negotiation on perceived cooperativeness, affecting hiring decisions. Note: $^{*}P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$.

Discussion

A persistent "class ceiling" constrains lower-class individuals from attaining the same earnings and leadership roles as their higher-class counterparts—even when they possess comparable credentials (8, 10). We identify a crucial behavioral pathway contributing to this disparity: a social-class gap in the propensity to negotiate. Across Studies 1 to 4, lower-class individuals are less likely to initiate negotiations, a tendency consistently associated with lower pay. This negotiation gap extends beyond compensation to other pivotal career outcomes, including promotion and job content, thereby compounding class disparities over time.

We find that this negotiation gap is associated with psychological adaptations to social class. Compared to their higher-class counterparts, lower-class individuals experience a diminished sense of power and heightened concerns about social backlash. Crucially, our experimental evidence suggests these concerns are not mere misperceptions: lower-class individuals who negotiate face greater social penalties than higher-class individuals for identical behavior. Thus, lower-class individuals face a double bind: refraining from negotiating may perpetuate economic disadvantage, yet initiating negotiations may expose them to greater social backlash. This pattern suggests that class inequality in negotiation cannot be addressed solely by encouraging lower-class individuals to advocate more assertively for themselves, as doing so may inadvertently exacerbate the very penalties they seek to avoid.

Theoretically, this research bridges the macrostructural and psychological accounts of class inequality by identifying an underexamined behavioral mechanism that compounds class disparities. Prior research has primarily focused on structural mechanisms—such as social capital, occupational sorting, and cultural mismatch—to explain class disparities in organizations and labor markets (5, 38, 61, 62). We extend this literature by identifying an underexamined behavioral pathway: negotiation propensity. Across diverse samples, we show that social-class differences in whether individuals initiate negotiation are associated with disparities in the allocation of resources and opportunities at work. Over time, these differences can accumulate, reinforcing structural inequalities and constraining upward mobility for lower-class individuals.

This research also offers a more nuanced understanding of how class-based stereotypes perpetuate organizational inequality. We show that initiating negotiations elicits greater backlash for lower-class individuals, potentially because it is seen as violating expectations associated with lower social class, particularly the prescriptive stereotypes of cooperativeness. This finding extends prior research on class-based discrimination (5, 7) and elucidates how class-based stereotype-guided perceptions can operate as subtle yet powerful barriers to mobility. Such dynamics are consequential in organizational contexts where self-advocacy is often expected and rewarded as a pathway to recognition, influence, and leadership (63, 64).

Practically, our research offers key implications for addressing widening economic stratification. Since negotiation plays an important role in shaping compensation and career advancement, it can either facilitate or impede upward mobility, making it a potential leverage point for promoting economic equality. Our findings suggest that lower-class individuals face distinct psychological and social barriers that reduce their likelihood of initiating negotiation, thereby constraining their chances of upward mobility. Although interventions aimed at enhancing lower-class individuals' sense of power may increase their propensity to negotiate, our findings highlight a critical caveat: lower-class negotiators face stronger social backlash. Accordingly, interventions that focus solely on increasing negotiation propensity—without addressing biases in organizational evaluations—are unlikely to be sufficient.

Effective solutions, therefore, require a dual approach. At the individual level, negotiation training and empowerment programs can help reduce gaps in confidence and information that discourage negotiation (65). At the institutional level, however, organizational leaders and policymakers may need to move beyond "blind" meritocracy and implement practices that reduce class-based bias in evaluations of negotiation. This may include incorporating social class, where appropriate, into diversity and inclusion metrics (e.g., tracking salary and promotion outcomes by social-class background), providing bias-awareness training for leaders, and integrating accountability mechanisms into performance evaluation and promotion systems to ensure that negotiation outcomes are assessed more equitably.

Finally, a complementary strategy is to reduce reliance on individual negotiation by deliberately restructuring bargaining contexts. Empirical evidence from the gender-negotiation literature suggests that greater transparency can meaningfully reduce inequality (for a review, see ref. 66). Transparency can take multiple forms, including disclosing pay ranges, clarifying whether and how employees may negotiate compensation and advancement opportunities, and reporting aggregated compensation and promotion outcomes by occupation and socioeconomic background where feasible. By making the "rules of the game" visible to all, these practices reduce information asymmetries and ambiguity, thereby narrowing class-based disparities in negotiation.

Our research has several limitations that suggest promising directions for future research. First, while we focused on how an individual's social class related to their propensity to negotiate, we did not examine how this relationship might depend on the social class of their negotiation partner or the evaluator. Prior research suggests that perceptions of relative status shape negotiation dynamics. Individuals often defer to higher-status counterparts, which can suppress negotiation behavior. Thus, class differences in negotiation may be either amplified or attenuated depending on the other party's social class. A fruitful next step would be to explore how the social class of negotiation partners or evaluators interacts with a negotiator's own social class to influence negotiation decisions and outcomes.

Second, the psychological pathways underlying class differences in negotiation propensity may extend beyond the mechanisms examined here. While our findings identify sense of power and concerns about social backlash as important psychological mechanisms, other mechanisms may also be at play. For instance, lower-class contexts often foster a prevention-focused orientation (67–69), a self-regulatory orientation centered on security,

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obligations, and the avoidance of negative outcomes (70, 71). This orientation may be especially relevant to negotiation because initiating negotiation involves the possibility of interpersonal friction, rejection, or reputational harm. Thus, even when individuals recognize that negotiation is appropriate or potentially beneficial, a prevention focus may heighten their sensitivity to the potential social costs of negotiating, thereby reducing their propensity to initiate negotiation. Future research could examine prevention focus as an additional psychological pathway through which social class shapes negotiation propensity.

Third, future research should examine whether class differences in negotiation propensity vary across normative and cultural contexts. Research has shown that lower-class individuals tend to be more attuned to social norms than their higher-class counterparts (69). Thus, their decision to initiate negotiation may be especially sensitive to whether negotiation is seen as appropriate or expected in a given setting. In contexts where negotiation is normative and expected—such as marketplaces with nonfixed prices or employment settings with structured salary bidding—the anticipated social backlash among lower-class individuals may be reduced, potentially attenuating class differences in negotiation propensity. Conversely, in contexts where relational concerns and interpersonal harmony are especially salient, and where negotiation may be seen as more disruptive to long-term relationships, lower-class individuals' concerns about social backlash may be heightened, potentially amplifying class differences in negotiation propensity.

Last, our research focused on whether individuals initiate negotiation, but did not examine what unfolds during the negotiation (e.g., strategies and negotiation performance). Social class may shape not only who approaches the negotiating table, but also what happens at the table. In addition, although our analyses help address differences in current opportunity structures, our data do not allow a direct test of individuals' cumulative prior exposure to negotiable job contexts. Future research could examine whether repeated exposure to jobs in which pay or work arrangements are negotiable shapes familiarity with negotiation and willingness to initiate it. Furthermore, future research could more directly examine the sources of backlash against lower-class negotiators. For instance, it would be valuable to test whether the class-based penalty for negotiating is attenuated when candidates are perceived to have strong outside options, exceptional qualifications, or other cues that make their requests appear more legitimate.

Despite growing calls for greater equality, a class ceiling persists. Our studies identify a critical pathway contributing to the persistence of this social-class inequality: the propensity to negotiate. Lower-class individuals are less likely to negotiate, a behavioral pattern consistently associated with worse economic outcomes. This class negotiation gap stems in part from class differences in sense of power and concerns about social backlash. Importantly, we also show that when lower-class individuals do negotiate, they face stronger social backlash than their higher-class counterparts. By clarifying both the behavioral gap and the unequal social costs of negotiating, our findings point to concrete opportunities to build workplaces where individuals from all social classes can seek and receive opportunities more equitably.

Data, Materials, and Software Availability. Preregistrations, materials, publicly shareable datasets, and analysis code are publicly available at https://osf.io/ajr6b (72).

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