Visualizing Social Class: the Effect of Gender and Economic Inequalities on the Visual Representations of the Rich and the Poors

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Theoretical background

Social class, approximated by socioeconomic status including economic position, education, and occupation (Manstead, 2018) is pivotal in favoring or hindering access to valuable resources. Stereotypes that portray the "rich" as competent and deserving, while viewing the "poors" as incompetent and undeserving serve as a route to perpetuate these inequalities (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017). Social evaluations are typically categorized into vertical dimensions, encompassing abilities and assertiveness, and horizontal dimensions, covering traits like friendliness and morality (Abele et al., 2021). Research shows that the "rich" are generally favored on the vertical dimension (Durante et al., 2017; Tao et al., 2016). whereas the "poor" may be favored on the horizontal dimension, though this is not consistent in the literature (Durante et al., 2017; Lindqvist et al., 2017). More than beliefs about features of a group, stereotypes also hold a visual component. People rapidly make inferences about personality or group membership based on physical appearance (Todorov et al., 2015). Conversely, the salience of a social category shapes how we envision the appearance of its members (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017). This research project aimed to explore how stereotypes about social class are reflected in facial representations of the wealthy and the poor. The first objective was to investigate these visual representations with a focus on the

intersection of social class and gender (WP1), the second objective was to explore how socioeconomic context influences these representations (WP2).

Original goals and grant outcomes

To access visual representations, we conducted a series of studies employing a classical two-choices reverse-correlation task (RC; Dotsch & Todorov, 2012). In the first phase of the RC, a pool of participants called "creators" selected from two simultaneously displayed faces, the one that best matched the social group they were given (e.g., a rich woman). The displayed faces were obtained by merging faces from the London Faces Database (Debruine & Jones, 2017) to create a base face to which we superimposed a random pattern of noise (see Figure 1 for an example).
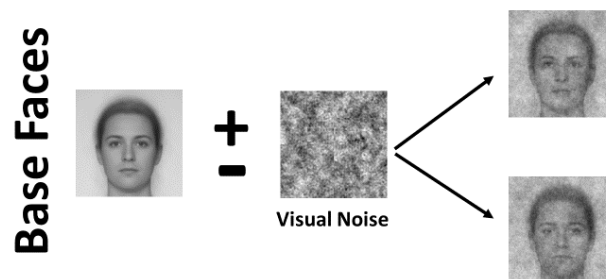

Figure 1

Procedure to Create Stimuli for the RC Task

For each participant, the faces selected are aggregated to form a classification image (CI). These CI are then averaged across all participants to compute a CI that would represent the prototype of the social category under scrutiny.

In the second phase, a separate group of participants, referred to as "judges," evaluated the classification images (CIs) generated in phase 1 based on features of interest (e.g., gender, wealth, attractiveness) as well as vertical (e.g., intelligence, determination) and horizontal (e.g., morality, warmth) stereotypical attributes.

WP1. Exploring the gendered visual representations of social class

Studies on intersectionality have highlighted the intersection of identities creates unique attributes that go beyond merely combining stereotypes associated with each identity (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Thus, in WP1, we aimed to investigate whether traditional stereotypes about social class manifest differently in the visual representations of men and women. To do so, we conducted a RC task. In the first phase, participants ($N = 240$), referred to as "creators," were randomly assigned to generate prototypes of faces representing a rich man, rich woman, poor man, poor woman, rich person, or poor person. These composite images (CIs) were then evaluated by a separate group of "judges" on both features of interest ($N = 143$) and stereotypical traits ($N = 92$).

As can be seen in the CIs (see Figure 2), it seems that people have different expectations regarding the physical appearance of poor and rich individuals. These differences were later confirmed by the rating task. Lower warmth is attributed to the CIs of the poors compared to the rich, with this effect being more pronounced for women's CIs than for men's. Interestingly, warmth is rated higher for women than men in the CIs of the rich, but lower for women in the CIs of the poor. This pattern aligns with the notion that gender stereotypes predominantly apply to upper-class white women (Landrine, 1985). This interaction was not observed for the vertical dimension.
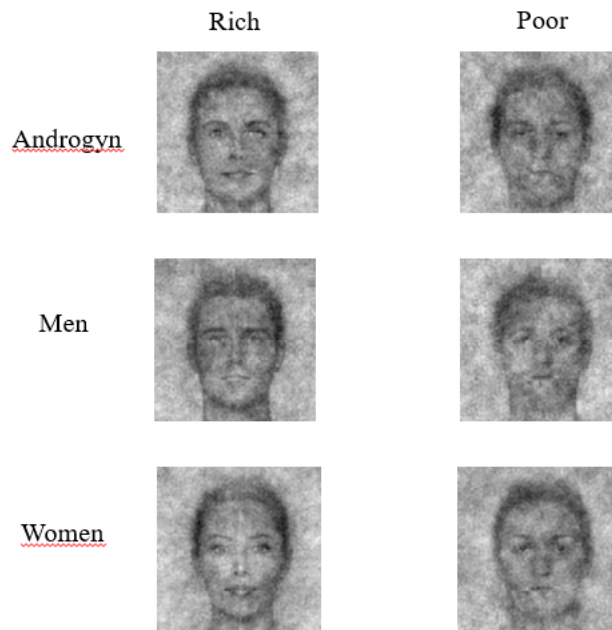
Figure 2

CIs Obtained in Phase 1 of the RC task

WP2. Exploring the impact of economic inequalities on visual representations of social class

When the level of economic inequality is high, economic dimensions of individuals' social identities become more central and relevant (Peters et al., 2022). This increased focus on social class, combined with a competitive atmosphere, intensifies stereotypes of both the rich and the poor, with the rich often viewed as more competent, deserving, and linked to "masculine traits" like dominance and assertiveness (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Moreno-Bella et al., 2019). WP2 tested the hypothesis that high levels of economic inequalities would amplify the differences in visual representations of the rich and poor.

To test this hypothesis, we employed a reverse correlation (RC) task within contexts of either low or high economic inequality. In the first phase (*N* = 240), participants were asked to create prototypes of either a rich or poor person. Before beginning the RC task, creators were

randomly assigned to a condition of low or high inequality, using a paradigm adapted from Bimboola (Jetten et al., 2015). The CIs for a rich and poor person obtained in a condition of low or high inequality were then evaluated by a separate group of "judges" on traits related to physical appearance ($N = 70$) or stereotypical traits ($N = 79$).

The RC task supported the hypothesis that distinctions between the rich and poor are amplified in contexts of high economic inequality. Specifically, the CIs of poor individuals were perceived as less wealthy than those of rich individuals, especially in the high-inequality condition. A similar interaction pattern emerged for stereotypical attributes: the "prototypical" faces of rich individuals were rated higher on both the horizontal dimension (only for traits related to abilities) and the vertical dimension (only for traits related to morality), with these differences being more pronounced under high inequality.

Contribution to wider research activities of the research team

The studies supported by the EASP seedcorn grant greatly enhanced our understanding of social class representations, notably by adopting an intersectional perspective, and explored how these representations are tied to levels of economic inequality. These findings have been shared at scientific conferences (Fourgassie et al., 2024) and are currently being prepared for publication. Importantly, the grant established a foundation for ongoing research, with additional studies currently planned to further explore whether these representations could be associated with discriminatory behaviors, and it also facilitated new collaborations with other scholars.

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