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# Partner Commitment in Close Relationships Mitigates Social Class Differences in Subjective Well-Being

Jacinth J. X. Tan<sup>1</sup>, Michael W. Kraus<sup>2</sup>, Emily A. Impett<sup>3</sup>,  
and Dacher Keltner<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

The present exploratory research examined the possibility that commitment in close relationships among lower class individuals, despite greater strains on those relationships, buffers them from poorer subjective well-being (SWB). In two samples of close relationship dyads, we found that when *partners* reported high commitment to the relationship, the typical deficits in relatively lower class individuals' well-being compared to their upper-class counterparts, assessed as life satisfaction among romantic couples (Study 1) and negative affect linked to depression among ethnically diverse close friendships (Study 2), were mitigated. Conversely, when partners reported low commitment to the relationship, relatively lower class individuals reported poorer well-being than their upper-class counterparts. These patterns were not found with actors' commitment. Implications of these findings for upending the class divide in SWB are discussed.

## Keywords

social class, commitment, relationships, subjective well-being

Close relationships with important others (e.g., friends, romantic partners) can shape one's self-concept and motivations (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1995) and are essential to subjective well-being (SWB; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Reis & Collins, 2004). However, resource constraints in lower class environments often strain relationships (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009), preventing lower class individuals from drawing on their relationships to improve their well-being. The present exploratory research examined relationship commitment in close relationships as a buffer against the negative impact of coming from lower class backgrounds on well-being. Overall, we found that high *partner* commitment mitigated the deficit in well-being of relatively lower class compared to upper-class individuals.

## Social Class and SWB

Social class can influence the social contexts in which people relate to one another (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011). Two independent processes shape an individual's social class (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000): One taps into the individual's objective access to material and social resources, assessed by reports of educational attainment (Snibbe & Markus, 2005), income, and occupation status (Oakes & Rossi, 2003). The

other taps into the individual's subjective perceptions of their position in society relative to others, assessed by one's relative status in an interaction with a friend, in a social group, or in society as a whole (Adler et al., 2000).

SWB includes three key components: positive affect, negative affect, and cognitive beliefs about life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Studies consistently find that lower class individuals report more negative life experiences, such as exposure to more interpersonal conflict and occupational stress (Matthews et al., 2000), and stronger experiences of dysphoric affect (Link, Lennon, & Dohrenwend, 1993) associated with poor well-being, although some research has found that this association is sometimes weak (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Howell & Howell, 2008). The effect of resources on individuals' life experiences can manifest across life domains. For lower class individuals, their neighborhoods may be less safe, jobs may be more unstable, and daily stress from

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contending with financial challenges can affect them in work and leisure. They are also less able to draw on their social capital due to their limited social networks (Campbell, Marsden, & Hurlbert, 1986; Pichler & Wallace, 2009). Overall, unlike upper-class individuals who are equipped with abundant material and social resources, lower class individuals have fewer resources to draw on to enhance their SWB.

## Importance of Relationships for Lower Class Individuals' SWB

The stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985) posits that social support is more protective for individuals under high stress than low stress. Specifically, social support can help individuals under stress by changing their appraisals of a threatening situation as stressful (Thoits, 1986) or by providing them additional material or emotional resources to deal with the stresses (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Cohen & McKay, 1984). This suggests that when faced with stresses stemming from economic, social, and structural disadvantage, being in close relationships that provide a stable source of social support can dampen the negative impact of such stressful environments and serve as an alternate source of positive SWB for lower class individuals.

However, developing stable relationships under resource scarcity is challenging. The systemic-transactional model of relationships posits that stressors that occur outside a relationship (e.g., workplace, finances, and community) can spill over to the relationship and create stress within the relationship (Bodenmann, 1997). This is particularly true for lower class individuals, who face more external stressors such as financial stress and job insecurity, than for upper-class individuals. These often spill over to their relationships, creating lower relationship quality among lower class than upper-class individuals. Indeed, financial stress is a frequent source of marital conflict that elicits marital distress and poor relationship quality for lower class couples (Conger et al., 1999; Papp et al., 2009), resulting in lower relationship satisfaction (Dakin & Wampler, 2008; Karney & Bradbury, 2005) and higher risk of marital dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002) among lower class than upper-class couples. Therefore, even though the stress-buffering hypothesis suggests that being in supportive close relationships should be beneficial for lower class individuals, this may not necessarily be the case because harsh economic circumstances often create dissatisfying and fragile relationships.

## The Role of Commitment in Close Relationships as a Buffer

Because close relationships among lower class individuals tend to be lower in quality, the buffering effect of close relationships may depend on these individuals' motivation to improve or persist in such relationships. Therefore, we explored the possibility that *relationship commitment*—the degree to which a person experiences a long-term orientation toward and persistence

in a relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998)—may reflect such motivations. Specifically, we examined whether being in close relationships characterized by high reported commitment would buffer lower class individuals against the impact of their negative life experiences, thus attenuating social class differences in SWB. This possibility is supported by prior research showing that commitment directly promotes behaviors that mitigate negative affect and conflict in relationships, such as promoting sacrifice (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001; Righetti & Impett, 2017) and accommodations for a partner's negative behaviors (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Importantly, greater commitment also predicted relationship maintenance outcomes such as lower likelihood of breakup (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Le & Agnew, 2003; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

Although we reasoned that relationship commitment should matter for the maintenance of close relationships for lower class individuals, it is unclear whether this would be the case for both actor and partner commitment or whether one of them would play a more critical role than the other in influencing lower class individuals' SWB. As past research has documented distinct actor and partner effects on relationship outcomes (e.g., Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Luo et al., 2008; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000), we also explored the unique moderating influence of actor and partner commitment on how social class relates to SWB in the current research.

We note that even though we suggest that highly committed close relationships would be beneficial for lower class individuals, we are not necessarily suggesting that relationship commitment is inconsequential for upper-class individuals' SWB. Rather, because upper-class individuals have more sources of SWB upon which to draw, we expected that highly committed relationships would have a greater positive impact on the SWB of lower class than that of upper-class individuals.

## The Present Investigation

We explored the buffering effect of relationship commitment on poor SWB linked to lower class backgrounds in two dyadic samples in different close relationship contexts: romantic couples (Study 1) and close friendships (Study 2). Both types of relationships are central to an individual's relational identity and known to influence SWB (Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Dush & Amato, 2005). To this end, we tested whether the effect of social class on SWB would be moderated by the commitment level of both partners within the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Garcia, Kenny, & Ledermann, 2015). Specifically, we examined the association between social class and SWB at high and low levels of actor commitment as well as at high and low levels of partner commitment. No other variables were examined in both the studies as moderators in this exploratory work.

## Study 1: Social Class, Commitment, and Life Satisfaction in Romantic Couples

In Study 1, we investigated the links between social class, SWB, and actor versus partner commitment in a sample of romantic couples whose data were collected as part of a larger dyadic study (Impett et al., 2012). Cognitive assessments of life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) were obtained over a period of 14 days after an initial laboratory interaction. As objective and subjective social classes are distinct constructs underlying one's social class identity (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), we examined associations with both objective social class, using participants' own educational attainment, and subjective social class rank.

## Method

### Participants

Eighty couples ( $n = 160$ ) from the San Francisco Bay Area were recruited for a study of romantic relationships through advertisements on craigslist.org. Their mean age was 23.84 years old ( $SD = 6.37$ ). Fifty-three percent self-identified as European or European American, 18% as Chinese or Chinese American, 8% as African or African American, 4% as Mexican or Mexican American, and 17% as other. The couples had been together between 6 months and 30 years ( $M = 29.23$  months,  $SD = 43.4$  months). Of the relationships, 75 were heterosexual and 5 were same-sex couples. The dyads were treated as indistinguishable.

The sample size was not specifically determined for the current research because the data came from a larger project on romantic relationships (Impett et al., 2012) collected in 2008. Nonetheless, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using G\*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to test the minimum effect size that can be detected given 0.8 power,  $\alpha$  level at .05, and  $N = 160$ . The analysis yielded a minimum effect size of  $R = .22$  that can be detected with our sample. As our analyses involved examining interaction effects that the sample may be underpowered to estimate (Simonsohn, 2014), future research should explore these associations with larger samples.

### Procedure

Both members of the couple first completed an initial online survey in which they provided demographic information and answered questions about their romantic relationship. Following these measures, the couples attended a laboratory session where they engaged in several dyadic conversations. After the lab interaction session, they participated in a 14-day daily experience study about their relationship, in which life satisfaction scores were assessed on each day (Impett et al., 2012).

## Measures

**Social class.** Participants completed two measures of social class: their own educational attainment and subjective social class rank. Educational attainment was rated based on six categories provided: (a) high school graduate or less, (b) some college (not currently), (c) some college (currently), (d) technical school, (e) college graduate, and (f) graduate school (coded from 1 to 6;  $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). Subjective social class rank was assessed by having participants rank themselves on a 10-rung ladder in the United States, with people at the top having the best jobs, most education, and earning the highest salaries ( $M = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ).

**Relationship commitment.** Both partners reported their relationship commitment on a standard 7-item measure (Rusbult et al., 1998). They responded to items such as "I want my relationship to last for a very long time" on 7-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*;  $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ;  $\alpha = .93$ )

**Life satisfaction.** Satisfaction with life was assessed with a standard 5-item measure (Diener et al., 1985). Participants responded to items such as "My life is close to my ideal" using 4-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). We computed a life satisfaction score averaged across the 14-day diary assessment ( $M = 3.07$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ ;  $\alpha = .98$ ).

## Results and Discussion

The zero-order correlations among all variables assessed are presented in Table 1, and the correlations among all the actor and partner variables are presented in Table 2.

We conducted the analysis using the APIM moderation ShinyApp developed by Kenny (2015). Structural equation modeling was used to estimate two models: an interaction model with four interaction effects (i.e., actor vs. partner social class crossed with actor vs. partner commitment) and a reduced model with only additive effects (Garcia et al., 2015). A poorer fit of the reduced model indicated that a moderation effect exists and the interaction effects were then inspected. For significant interaction effects, simple slopes of participant social class at low ( $-1 SD$ ) and high commitment ( $+1 SD$ ) levels were examined.<sup>1</sup> All social class and commitment variables in the models were centered.

For the analysis with objective social class, the reduced model revealed only a main effect of actor commitment,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.10, .29], such that actors who reported higher commitment also reported greater life satisfaction on average. There were no significant main effects of partner commitment,  $\beta = .040$ ,  $p = .40$ , 95% CI [-.053, .134], actor social class,  $\beta = .029$ ,  $p = .43$ , 95% CI [-.044, .10], and partner social class,  $\beta = -.044$ ,  $p = .23$ , 95% CI [-.053, .028].

Importantly, the test of the interaction model predicting participants' life satisfaction averaged across 14 days was significant, indicated by the poorer fit of the reduced model,

**Table 1.** Zero-Order Correlations Between Social Class, Relationship Commitment, and Life Satisfaction in Romantic Couples (Study 1).

	Objective Social Class (Education)	Subjective Social Class	Commitment	Life Satisfaction <sub>14-day</sub>
Objective social class (education)	—			
Subjective social class	.21*	—		
Commitment	.15	-.12	—	
Life satisfaction	.04	.06	.28**	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .**Table 2.** Zero-Order Correlations Between Actor and Partner Variables of Social Class, Relationship Commitment, and Life Satisfaction in Romantic Couples (Study 1).

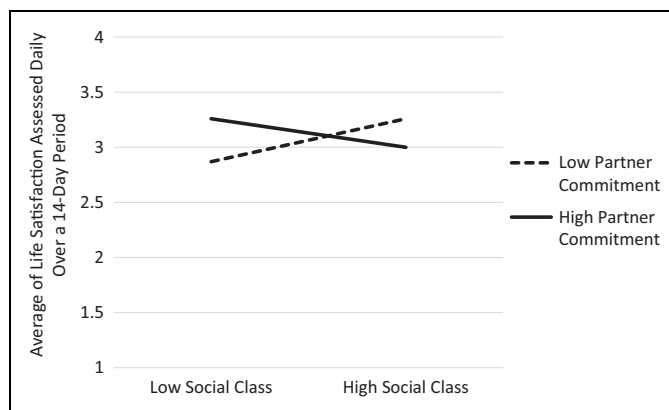
Actor Variables	Objective Social Class (Education)	Subjective Social Class	Commitment	Life Satisfaction
Partner variables				
Objective social class (education)	.59**			
Subjective social class	.15	.21**		
Commitment	.16*	-.028	.46**	
Life satisfaction	-.031	-.11	.21**	.52**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

$\chi^2(4) = 25.16, p < .001$ , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .181. Within this model, only a significant interaction between actor social class and partner commitment emerged,  $\beta = -.15, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.23, -.059]$ . Simple slopes analyses revealed that at low partner commitment, relatively lower class participants reported significantly lower life satisfaction than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = .16, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [.058, .27]$ . Conversely, at high partner commitment, relatively lower class participants showed a nonsignificant tendency to report higher life satisfaction than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = -.10, p = .067, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.21, .007]$ . These patterns are depicted in Figure 1. No other interaction effects emerged.

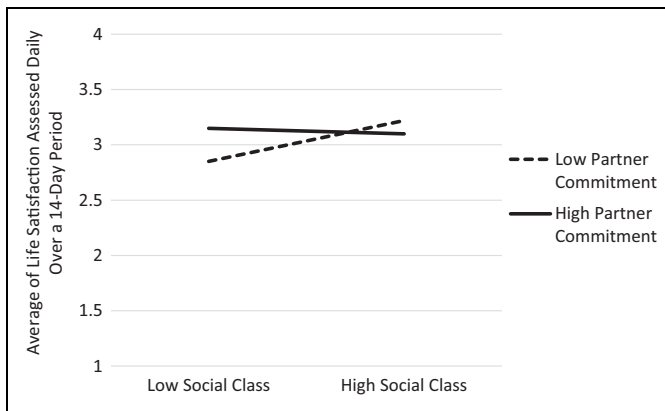
For the analysis with subjective social class, the reduced model revealed the following main effects: There was a significant main effect of partner social class,  $\beta = -.069, p = .008, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.051, -.018]$ , such that participants with relatively lower class partners reported greater life satisfaction than those with upper-class partners. Relatively lower class actors also showed a nonsignificant tendency to report lower life satisfaction than did upper-class actors,  $\beta = .048, p = .063, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.003, .098]$ . A significant main effect of actor commitment also emerged,  $\beta = .23, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.14, .32]$ , such that actors who reported higher commitment also reported greater life satisfaction. There was no significant effect of partner commitment,  $\beta = .039, p = .39, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.051, .13]$ .

Critically, the test of the interaction model was also significant, as indicated by the poorer fit of the reduced model,  $\chi^2(4) = 13.00, p = .011, \text{RMSEA} = .118$ . Similar to the results for objective social class, only a significant interaction between actor social class and partner commitment emerged,  $\beta = -.074, p = .008, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.13, -.019]$ . Simple slopes analyses revealed similar patterns to those of objective social class: At low partner commitment, relatively lower class participants

**Figure 1.** The association between actor objective social class and 14-day life satisfaction as a function of partner commitment. High and low refer to estimated values for individuals at 1 SD above and below the mean (Study 1).

reported significantly lower life satisfaction than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = .12, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.049, .18]$ , whereas at high partner commitment, relatively lower and upper-class participants reported comparable levels of life satisfaction,  $\beta = -.020, p = .61, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.095, .056]$ . These patterns are depicted in Figure 2. Again, no other interaction effects emerged.

Study 1 provided initial evidence that relationship commitment moderates social class differences in participants' SWB, with the effect observed specifically with partner's commitment: In romantic relationships, relatively lower class individuals reported lower life satisfaction than their upper-class counterparts when their partner reported low commitment but were buffered from the deficits in life satisfaction when their partner reported high commitment.



**Figure 2.** The association between actor subjective social class and 14-day life satisfaction as a function of partner commitment. High and low refer to estimated values for individuals at 1 SD above and below the mean (Study 1).

## Study 2: Social Class, Relationship Commitment, and Negative Affect in a Sample of Female Friends

We extended our investigation to dyadic friendships by examining a sample of close female friends of diverse ethnic backgrounds who engaged in an interaction task in the laboratory. Based on available indices in the data set, we examined the negative affective component of SWB: state–trait anxiety and dysphoric affect (Diener et al., 1999).

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred and forty-four female undergraduate friends (122 friendship dyads) participated in a friendship study advertised in classroom and university announcements at a West Coast public university. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, and the ethnic distribution was 46.1% European American, 38.2% Latina, 13.2% Black, and 2.5% multiethnic. Participants had been friends for an average of 2.5 years ( $M = 31.52$  months,  $SD = 36.32$ ). The dyads were treated as indistinguishable.

The sample size was not specifically determined for the current research because the data were collected as part of a larger study of friendships in 2006 (Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011). As in Study 1, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using G\*Power to test the minimum effect size that can be detected given 0.8 power,  $\alpha$  level at .05, and  $N = 244$ . The analysis yielded a minimum effect size of  $R = .18$  that can be detected with our sample.

### Procedure

Friendship pairs received a packet of questionnaires that they were instructed to fill out before attending a main laboratory session together. This packet assessed demographic

information and friendship behaviors including their commitment to the friend in the interaction study. Approximately 1 week later, friendship pairs arrived together at the laboratory to engage in a number of social interaction tasks and to fill out measures of emotion and SWB. Among these measures were assessments of state–trait anxiety and dysphoric affect, which participants filled out at a table across from their friend. At the end, participants received payment or course credit for participation and were debriefed about the purpose of the study.

## Measures

**Social class.** Social class was assessed using participant reports of parental educational attainment and annual household income as in prior research (Adler et al., 2000). Each parent’s education attainment was assessed using six categories: (a) did not finish high school, (b) finished high school, (c) some college, (d) bachelor’s degree, (e) some graduate work, and (f) advanced degree. Annual household income was assessed using seven categories: (a) less than US\$11,000, (b) US\$11,000–20,999, (c) US\$21,000–30,999, (d) US\$31,000–40,999, (e) US\$41,000–50,999, (f) US\$51,000–60,999, and (g) more than US\$60,999. As household income, mother’s education, and father’s education were highly correlated ( $r_s = .59$ – $.73$ ,  $p_s < .05$ ), they were each standardized and then averaged to create a single index of social class ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Friendship commitment.** Participants completed several subjective ratings about their friendship prior to arriving at the laboratory, and we used a subset of these items to indicate commitment to the friendship. Seven items that were most face valid were chosen (e.g., “How likely is it that your friendship will be permanent?”), each answered on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*;  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ;  $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Negative affect in SWB.** Using the 20-item State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983), participants rated how much state-related anxiety (e.g., I am tense, I feel calm) and trait-related anxiety (e.g., I worry too much over something that really doesn’t matter) they experienced on a 4-point scale (1 = *almost never*, 4 = *almost always*;  $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ;  $\alpha = .91$ ). Dysphoric affect was also assessed using the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977) in which participants rated how they felt during the past week (e.g., “I thought my life had been a failure”) on a 4-point scale (1 = *rarely or none of the time*, 4 = *most of the time*;  $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ;  $\alpha = .75$ ).

## Results and Discussion

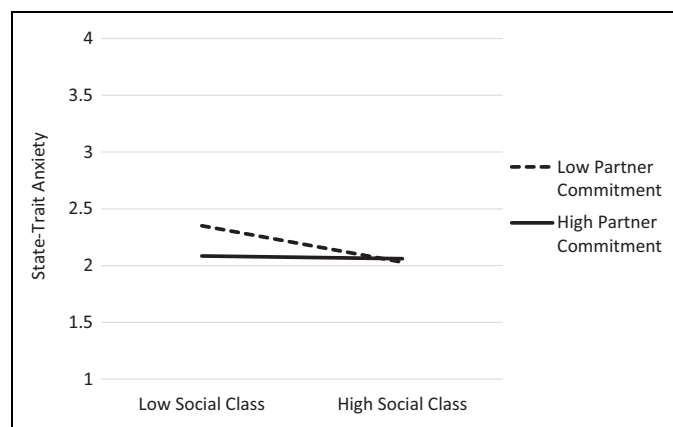
The zero-order correlations among all the variables assessed are presented in Table 3, and the correlations among all the actor and partner variables are presented in Table 4. For data analysis, we used the same analytic strategy as in Study 1.

**Table 3.** Zero-Order Correlations Between Social Class, Relationship Commitment, and Dysphoric Affect in Female Friendship Dyads (Study 2).

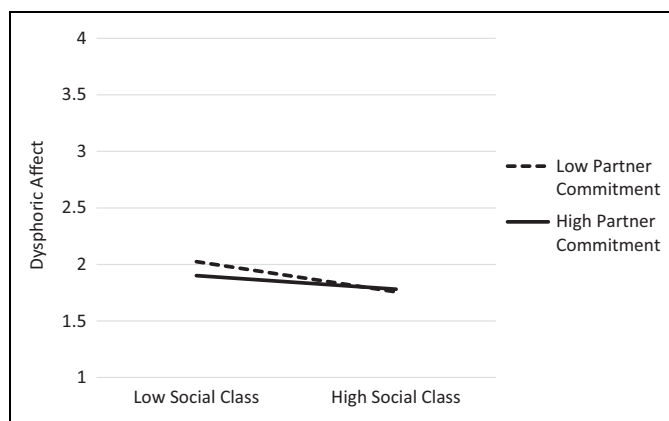
	Social Class	Commitment	Dysphoric Affect	State–Trait Anxiety
Social class	—			
Commitment	-.03	—		
Dysphoric affect	-.19*	-.04	—	
State–trait anxiety	-.18*	-.02	.75**	—

**Table 4.** Zero-Order Correlations Between Actor and Partner Variables of Social Class, Relationship Commitment, and Dysphoric Affect in Female Friendship Dyads (Study 2).

Actor Variables	Social Class	Commitment	State–Trait Anxiety	Dysphoric Affect
Partner variables				
Social class	.35**			
Commitment	-.023	.52**		
State–trait anxiety	-.16*	-.072	.27**	
Dysphoric affect	-.16*	-.021	.34**	.44**



**Figure 3.** The association between actor objective social class and state–trait anxiety as a function of partner commitment. High and low refer to estimated values for individuals at 1 SD above and below the mean (Study 2).



**Figure 4.** The association between actor objective social class and dysphoric affect as a function of partner commitment. High and low refer to estimated values for individuals at 1 SD above and below the mean (Study 2).

### State–Trait Anxiety

In the reduced model, there were main effects of actor social class,  $\beta = -.10, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.16, -.048]$ , and partner social class,  $\beta = -.089, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.18, -.033]$ , such that both relatively lower class actors and partners experienced greater state–trait anxiety than did upper-class actors and partners. While there was no significant effect of actor commitment,  $\beta = .014, p = .74, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.07, .098]$ , there was a main effect of partner commitment,  $\beta = -.092, p = .032, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.18, -.008]$ , such that actors with partners who reported lower commitment reported higher state–trait anxiety.

Importantly, the reduced model showed a poorer fit,  $\chi^2(4) = 13.78, p = .008, \text{ RMSEA} = .099$ , indicating that the test of the interaction model was significant. Within this model, only a significant interaction between actor social class and partner commitment emerged,  $\beta = .14, p = .026, 95\% \text{ CI } [.016, .26]$ .

Simple slopes analyses revealed patterns that were consistent with those found in Study 1: At low partner commitment, relatively lower class participants reported significantly higher state–trait anxiety than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = -.19, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.28, -.094]$ . Conversely, at high partner commitment, relatively lower and upper-class participants reported comparable levels of state–trait anxiety,  $\beta = -.020, p = .66, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.11, .071]$ . These patterns are depicted in Figure 3. As in Study 1, no other interaction effects emerged.

### Dysphoric Affect

In the reduced model, only the main effects of actor social class,  $\beta = -.11, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.056, -.13]$ , and partner social class emerged,  $\beta = -.082, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.117, -.025]$ ,



**Table 5.** Summary of Findings From Studies 1 and 2.

Outcome Variables	Predictors				
	Social Class	Actor Commitment	Partner Commitment	Social Class × Actor Commitment	Social Class × Partner Commitment
Study 1					
Life satisfaction (with objective Social Class)	.029	.20***	.040	-.073	-.15***
Life satisfaction (with subjective Social Class)	.048	.23***	.039	-.006	-.074**
Study 2					
State–trait anxiety	-.10***	.014	-.092*	.049	.14*
Dysphoric affect	-.11***	-.018	-.034	.047	.10

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

such that both relatively lower class actors and partners experienced greater dysphoric affect than did upper-class actors and partners. There were no main effects of actor commitment,  $\beta = -.018$ ,  $p = .67$ , 95% CI  $[-.10, .065]$ , and partner commitment,  $\beta = -.034$ ,  $p = .43$ , 95% CI  $[-.12, .050]$ .

Nonetheless, the reduced model this time showed mediocre fit,  $\chi^2(4) = 9.62$ ,  $p = .047$ , RMSEA = .075, suggesting a weaker interaction between actor social class and partner commitment,  $\beta = .10$ ,  $p = .047$ , 95% CI  $[-.021, .22]$ . Simple slopes analyses revealed similar patterns as with state–trait anxiety: At low partner commitment, relatively lower class participants reported significantly higher dysphoric affect than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = -.14$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI  $[-.24, -.043]$ , whereas at high partner commitment, the pattern was attenuated such that relatively lower class participants reported only marginally higher dysphoric affect than did upper-class participants,  $\beta = -.085$ ,  $p = .084$ , 95% CI  $[-.18, .011]$ . These patterns are depicted in Figure 4.

Study 2 provided additional evidence for the buffering role of partner commitment: In friendships in which partner commitment was low, relatively lower class individuals reported higher state–trait anxiety and dysphoric affect than did their upper-class counterparts, whereas in friendships where partner commitment was high, relatively lower class individuals were buffered from the deficits in negative affect compared to upper-class individuals.<sup>2</sup>

## General Discussion

Across two dyadic samples, the current research presented correlational evidence that a partner's commitment to the relationship acted as a buffer against the poorer SWB of relatively lower class individuals compared to upper-class individuals. The findings are summarized in Table 5. Specifically, when partner commitment was low, relatively lower class participants reported poorer SWB than did upper-class participants, whereas this deficit was attenuated when partner commitment was high. This was not observed with actor commitment. Nonetheless, we reiterate the exploratory and correlational nature of this work—caution should be taken in drawing any causal inferences from these findings.

Interestingly, actor commitment did not appear to be protective of relatively lower class individuals' SWB in either study. We suggest two possible reasons for why this might be the case. First, it is possible that highly committed partners provide hidden or subtle social support that alleviates stress (Bolger & Amarel, 2007) in the actor or in the relationship. Second, if the relationships of lower class individuals are indeed lower in quality, it is also possible that some of these highly committed actors were investing in relationships with unresponsive partners. In other words, some of these highly committed actors may be alone in wanting to improve or persist in the relationship, resulting in their poorer SWB. We believe this underscores the importance of the partner's commitment relative to the actor's commitment for lower class individuals' SWB—that their own motivation and persistence are insufficient and that their beliefs or perceptions about their partner's motivation and persistence are particularly important because it means that they can count on their partner, even in times of difficulty. This dovetails with prior research illustrating the positive impact that perceived partner commitment has on actors, such as increasing their own gratitude and commitment toward their partner (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013) as well as increasing their trust and reliance on the relationship (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Nonetheless, as the current studies did not assess provision of social support by actors and partners, as well as perceived partner commitment, future replication of this study is needed with those measures included to ascertain these possible explanations.

We should also caution against inferring that lower class individuals' own commitment to the relationship does not matter at all. Close relationships are by nature interdependent (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), implying that the mutuality of commitment between both partners in a relationship is crucial (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). From this perspective, it is possible that lower class individuals may be most strongly buffered from poorer SWB when both actors and partners are committed to the relationship compared to when only the partners are committed. As investigating this would involve examining a three-way interaction, which the current studies were not designed and are underpowered to test, future research could examine this possibility along with direct replications of the current analyses using larger samples.



The buffering effect of partner commitment for relatively lower class individuals' SWB was observed across both romantic relationships and close friendships, suggesting that these are alternative sources of positive SWB upon which lower class individuals can draw. However, the effects obtained with close friendships were also notably weaker than those found among romantic partners. It is likely that perceiving security in romantic relationships may be more important and beneficial than perceiving security in friendships. Nonetheless, both studies also differed in other aspects including the type of sample (community vs. college participants) and the type of SWB outcome measure (life satisfaction vs. negative affect). These distinctions raise important future research questions about the relational variables that moderate the role of partner commitment in shaping SWB among lower class individuals.

Some limitations of the current research are worth noting. First, the correlational nature of both studies limits causal links that can be drawn between commitment levels and SWB. It is entirely possible that an individual's SWB can also affect their partner's level of commitment. Future work could elucidate the causal direction by manipulating perceptions of partner's commitment and its effect on the link between social class and SWB or tracking the links among all the variables in a longitudinal design. Study 2 also had constraints with respect to the sample characteristics: The friendship dyads were a college sample, which tends to have a restricted range in social class. Thus, it remains unclear if the effects obtained in the study only apply to relatively lower class individuals but not for those living under absolute poverty. As well, in both studies, different measures were used based on the availability of measures in each data set, so it is unclear whether the observed effects are specific to certain SWB measures or reflect a more general phenomenon. Relatedly, although we found converging patterns between objective and subjective social class indices in Study 1, we could not demonstrate that in Study 2, as subjective social class measures were not available in the data.

Power analyses in both studies also revealed low power to detect the specific interaction effects we found, although the sensitivity analyses revealed that we were at least powered to detect an approximately typical effect in social psychology (Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). We acknowledge that this is an inherent limitation of the current research and strongly encourage future research in conducting a more rigorous empirical test of our observed patterns with a much larger sample of relationship dyads. However, despite the inherent weakness with the current data, we pressed on with these findings because large samples of dyadic data that assess commitment of both partners are notoriously difficult to collect and completely absent from the literature on social class and SWB. Moreover, we view these patterns as important enough to investigate in less than ideal conditions: Understanding the relational contexts that buffer lower class individuals from lower SWB has direct bearing on a question—the association between social class and SWB—that has fascinated psychologists and economists for decades. How close relationships play a potential role in protecting relatively lower class individuals

from the harsher contexts of their environments has far-reaching implications for the studies of SWB and social class. We hope that research that transparently acknowledges these shortcomings is viewed as an important enough contribution to the literature and worthy of follow-up by researchers who might not have considered relationships as a central moderator in the social class and SWB association.

To conclude, despite the challenges faced by lower class individuals due to greater social and economic uncertainty in their environments, we demonstrate that gaps in well-being are not an inevitable outcome. The observed benefits of being in close relationships with highly committed partners illustrate the capacity for communities with scarce resources to cope with the external stressors from their environments. We hope these findings will help to motivate and promote efforts to support relationships for the lowest status members of society and improve their overall SWB.

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### Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

### Notes

1. For all analyses, we also examined simple slopes of commitment at low ( $-1 SD$ ) and high ( $+1 SD$ ) levels of social class, which are reported in the Supplemental Materials.
2. For both studies, we also conducted post hoc power analyses using the actor-partner interdependence model Power Shinyapp (Ackerman & Kenny, 2016) to determine the power for detecting our interaction effects. For Study 1, given our sample of 80 dyads at  $\alpha$  level of .05, the power for detecting the interaction effect between actor social class and partner commitment was .445 with objective social class and .143 with subjective social class. For Study 2, given our sample of 122 dyads at  $\alpha$  level of .05, the power for detecting the interaction effect between actor social class and partner commitment was .533 for state-trait anxiety and .311 for dysphoric affect. We acknowledge that future replications of these findings with a much larger sample size are needed.

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