Empathy-Based Guilt and Socioeconomic Status: An Empirical Investigation of Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Using an archival data set of 2541 adults, we examined the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES), empathy, empathy-based interpersonal guilt and depression. Consistent with our clinical impressions, we found that lower SES was associated with higher rates of survivor guilt, empathic concern for others, and depression.

INTRODUCTION

The rise in interest in empathy and prosocial emotions, including guilt and compassion, has led researchers, especially from the field of social and clinical psychology, to challenge the established perspective on the unconscious mind. We began to change our perspective of the unconscious from being a repository for socially unacceptable ideas, wishes or desires, and traumatic memories to discovering a new, much kinder, profoundly adaptive non-conscious mind. Our research on empathy-based guilt embraces this newer and kinder perspective on the non-conscious mind.

Empathy-based guilt is defined as an emotion that arises from the belief that one has harmed another. In our clinic, we found individuals, who were suffering from unconscious altruism towards their family and friends experienced higher levels of distorted beliefs that their own healthy development (e.g., happy relationships, financial success, work satisfaction) would inadvertently make those less fortunate suffer simply by social comparison. The result was often the development of inhibitions, preventing individuals with high empathy-based guilt from achieving their developmental goals to avoid harming others.

Using archival empirical data, this quantitative study aimed to explore the role of SES and prosocial emotions. It was hypothesized that individuals from lower SES backgrounds would report higher levels of empathy-based guilt, depression, and empathic concern for the welfare of others compared to those from higher SES backgrounds. We examined the relationship between SES, as measured by self-rated parental social class, empathy-based interpersonal guilt, empathy, and depression, on a sample of 2,541 adults. See **Figure 1** and **2**.

METHODS

Respondents were obtained by way of announcements on listservs, websites, and bulletin boards in the United States. They were directed to the ongoing online anonymous study on culture and emotions on the website of The Emotions, Personality, and Altruism Research Group (EPARG) at the Wright Institute. Standard measures listed along with a demographic questionnaire were included.

METHODS CONTINUED

INSTRUMENTS:

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997). The IGQ-67 is a 67-item measure, using Likert scales to assess empathy-based guilt. Three subscales of the IGQ-67 were used: "Survivor Guilt" is characterized by the belief that being successful or happy will make others feel inadequate simply by comparison (e.g., "It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with"). "Separation Guilt" is characterized by the belief that if a person separates, leads his or her own life, or differs from loved ones in some way, he or she will cause loved ones to suffer (e.g. "I am reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends"). "Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt" is characterized by the belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well-being of others (e.g. "I often find myself doing what someone else wants me to do, rather than doing what I would most enjoy").
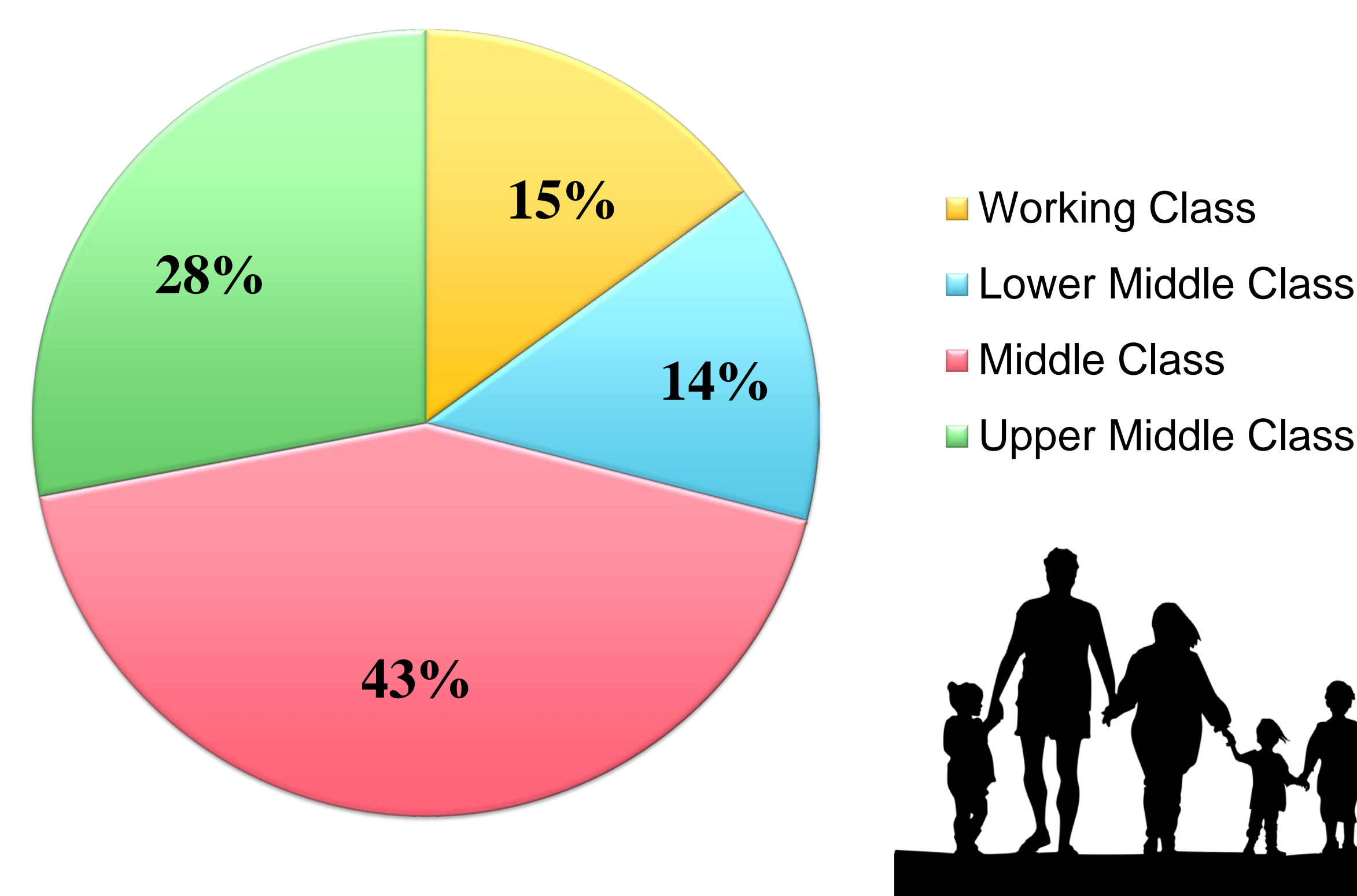
Compassionate Altruism Scale (CAS; Berry & O'Connor, 2002). The CAS is a 45-item instrument, derived from a measure of social support (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). Instead of measuring how much social support a person received, the CAS measures how much support someone tends to extend to others. Respondents indicate how frequently they perform acts of altruism for family members, friends, and strangers in a variety of social situations. Items from this questionnaire include how often the participant "gave money for an indefinite amount of time" and "helped them think about a problem."

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980): The IRI is a 28-item self-report instrument measuring distinct categories of empathy. Perspective taking is the ability to identify with, or understand cognitively the situation experienced by another person. Empathic Concern is the degree of concern a person tends to feel on witnessing difficult or unpleasant experiences occurring to another person. Personal Distress is the degree of distress a person is likely to feel, upon witnessing difficulties experienced by another person.

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977) is a widely-used 20-item self-report instrument, with responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, and total scores ranging from 0 to 60. The cut-off score for depression is equal to or greater than 16, which indicates at least a mild depression, though many clinicians mark a mild depression staring well below 16.

RESULTS

Figure 1. Parental SES (%)

- Working Class — 15%
- Lower Middle Class — 14%
- Middle Class — 43%
- Upper Middle Class — 28%

RESULTS CONTINUED

Analysis of covariance was used to examine the effects of respondents' SES backgrounds on empathy-based interpersonal guilt, emphatic concern, and depression, while treating age, gender, and ethnicity as covariates. For each psychological outcome variable, we tested (1) polynomial contrasts across social class groups and (2) simple contrasts of the working class group to the other three social class groups (lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle). See **Table 1** and **Figure 3**.

There were negative linear effects across social classes for both survivor guilt (p<.001) and omnipotent responsibility guilt (p<.01), suggesting that these types of guilt decrease linearly with higher SES backgrounds. Simple contrasts indicated that respondents from the working class group were higher in survivor guilt than all three higher SES groups (all p<.05). The working class group was higher than the middle and upper-middle class groups (both p<.05), and approached significance for the lower-middle class group (p=.09).

For empathic concern, there was a quadratic effect across social class groups (p<.05), indicating a non-linear association between SES groups and empathy. Simple contrasts revealed that the working class group was significantly higher in empathic concern than the lower-middle and middle class groups but not the upper-middle class group.

For depression, there was a negative linear effect across social classes (p<.01), which indicates higher levels of depression associated with lower SES background. Simple contrasts revealed that the working class group failed to differ from the lower-middle class group, but was higher in depression than the middle class group (p<.05) and the upper-middle class group (p<.01). In conclusion, the study found lower SES was associated with higher rates of survivor guilt, empathic concern for others, and depression.

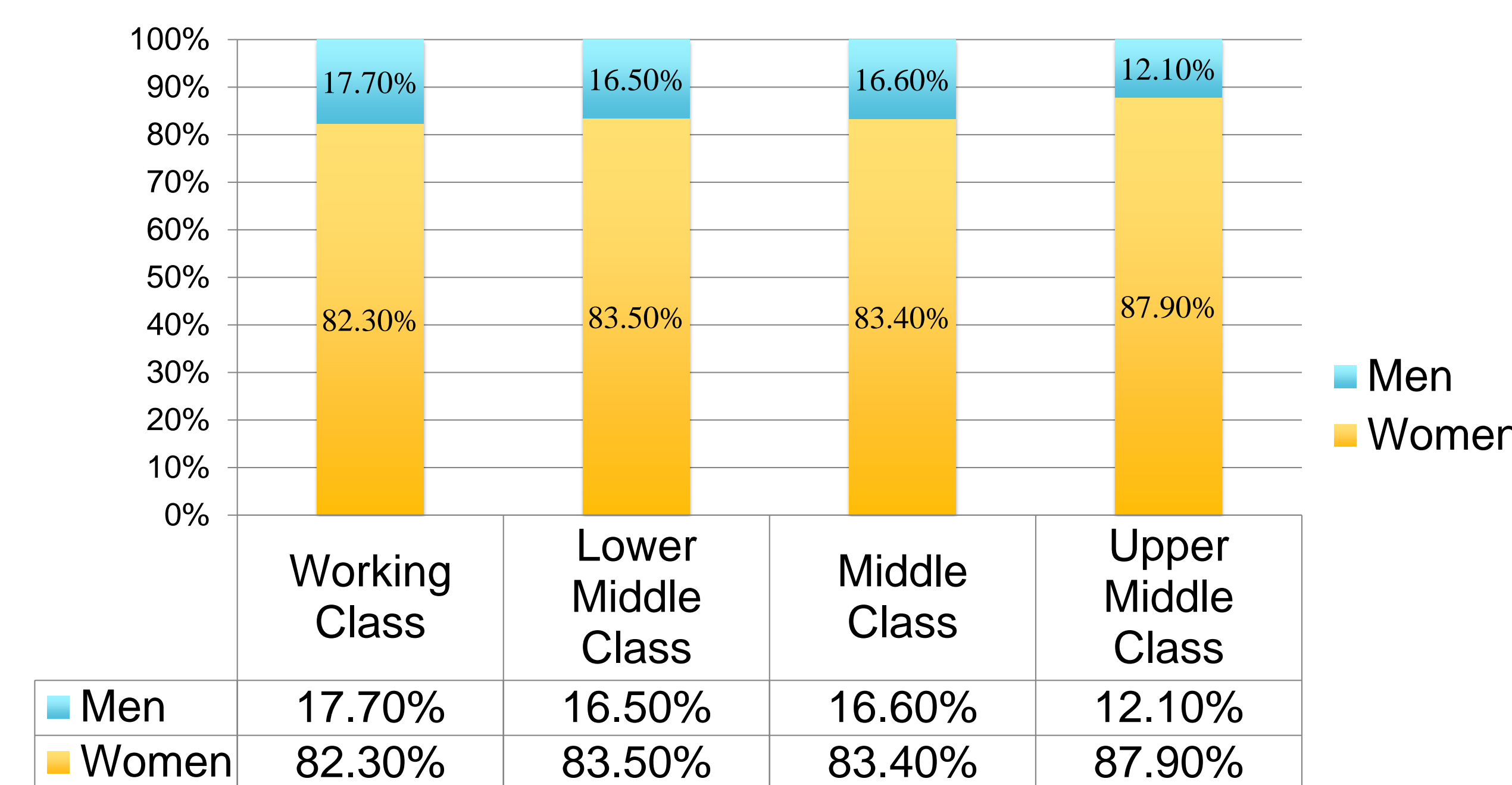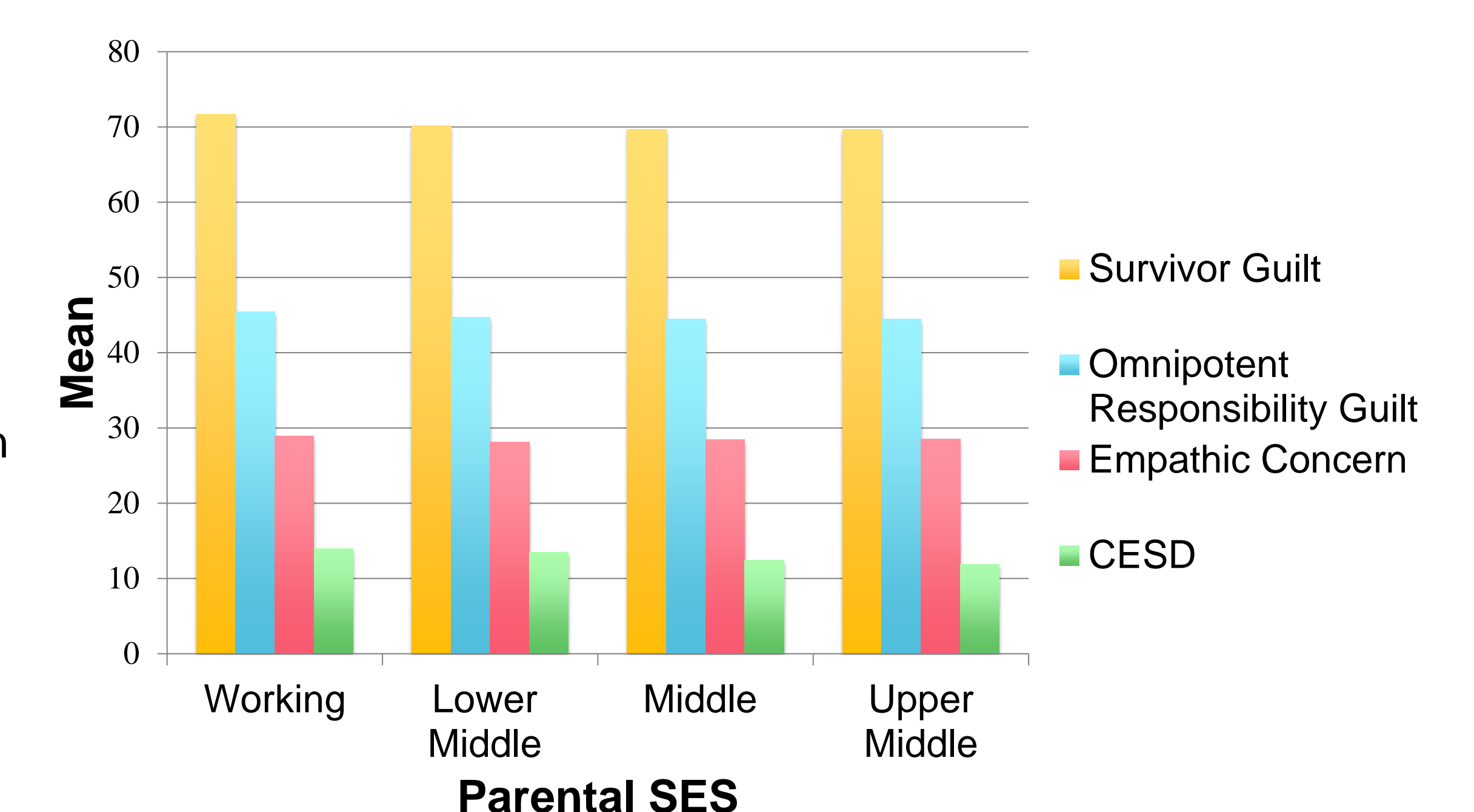### Figure 2. Gender and Parental SES

	Working Class	Lower Middle Class	Middle Class	Upper Middle Class
Men	17.70%	16.50%	16.60%	12.10%
Women	82.30%	83.50%	83.40%	87.90%

Figure 3. Mean Based on Parental SES

Legend: Survivor Guilt, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, Empathic Concern, CESD (by Parental SES: Working, Lower Middle, Middle, Upper Middle)

Table 1. ANCOVA for Dependent Variables

Variable	Sums of Square	Mean Square	F	Significance
Survivor Guilt	1458.967	486.322	5.110	0.002**
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	540.671	180.224	3.143	0.024*
Empathic Concern	107.089	35.696	2.420	0.064
CESD	1247.822	415.941	3.799	0.100

DISCUSSION

This study supported prior research associating socioeconomic class and prosocial emotions, empathy, and altruistic behavior, with lower class populations generally demonstrating greater empathy, altruistic behavior and prosocial emotions such as survivor guilt and an unrealistic, omnipotent sense of responsibility for others. While one might expect that those who have more would feel survivor guilt towards those with less, data points in the opposite direction. Many suggest that people from lower socioeconomic classes are more interdependent; they need to lean upon one another, and this has led to the evolution of the higher proneness to empathy, supporting mutually supportive and cooperative behavior. This study mirrored others in that the lower the class, the higher the levels of survivor guilt proneness, emotional empathy, or concern for others.

The importance of empathy, prosocial motivation and altruistic behavior is increasing in today's world. While climate change is calling for massive cooperative efforts within and between nations, the concentration of wealth at the top is escalating, and with it, political inequity. It was reported in the Nation that today, 20 people own as much wealth as half of all Americans. We can only wonder if the questionable current decisions being made in Washington by one of the wealthiest presidential cabinets in American history, is a compelling example of lower levels of empathy found in the wealthy, as might be expected by findings in this and other similar studies.

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