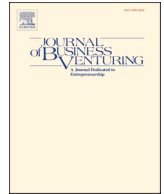




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## Journal of Business Venturing

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusvent](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusvent)

## Social class origin and entrepreneurship: An integrative review and research agenda

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### ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship research is increasingly examining how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial pathways. This growing body of work highlights the enduring advantages and disadvantages entrepreneurs face based on their access to economic, social, and cultural capital acquired through childhood or birth—challenging the popular “rags to riches” narrative that upward mobility is equally attainable for all. To unify and extend this conversation, we develop an integrative framework that explains how entrepreneurs’ social class origin influences their mobility. Drawing on an interdisciplinary review of 219 articles, we identify three class-based mechanisms—entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer, entrepreneurial habitus formation, and access to networks and evaluations—through which social class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes and, ultimately, social mobility. We conclude by offering three recommendations for future research on social class origin in entrepreneurship, aimed at advancing theory, addressing inequality, and informing inclusive entrepreneurial policy.

### 1. Executive summary

Entrepreneurs begin with unequal resources and opportunities shaped by their upbringing. Childhood experiences—such as access to quality education, financial support, cultural exposure, and social connections—vary significantly across individuals. While these individual dimensions have received growing attention in policy and academic circles, discussions often remain fragmented. A broader and more integrative view of social class origin—which encompasses access to economic capital (e.g., income and wealth), cultural capital (e.g., cultural tastes and practices), and social capital (e.g., networks and connections) acquired through childhood or birth—and its influence on entrepreneurial outcomes and social mobility remains underdeveloped. Recent debates around social class in organizational research, largely in response to rising global inequality, tend to also focus on employees within established organizations, often overlooking entrepreneurs altogether.

We argue that it is time to bring entrepreneurs’ social class origin to the forefront. Entrepreneurship is frequently celebrated as a pathway to upward mobility in capitalist societies, fueling enduring narratives of individuals who rise “from rags to riches.” Yet this narrative obscures the structural advantages and disadvantages embedded in social class origin. A holistic understanding of how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes is essential to fully grasp the possibilities and limits of social mobility through entrepreneurship. Our goal is to provide a foundation for future research and policy conversations that more fully account for class-based inequalities in entrepreneurial trajectories.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s capital forms as a theoretical foundation, we identify, analyze, and integrate 219 articles from across

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2025.106503>

Received 26 March 2024; Received in revised form 10 April 2025; Accepted 17 April 2025

Available online 24 April 2025

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disciplines. We first offer an interdisciplinary understanding of what constitutes an entrepreneur's social class origin. We then develop a framework that outlines three key mechanisms linking social class origin to entrepreneurial outcomes and, ultimately, social mobility. First, social class origin affects the degree of *entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer*, which can directly alleviate resource constraints for entrepreneurs. Second, it shapes socialization experiences that influence long-term dispositions—what we term *entrepreneurial habitus formation*—and, in turn, entrepreneurial cognition and behavior under uncertainty. Third, social class origin structures *access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations*, influencing entrepreneurs' ability to build networks and gain favorable evaluations from resource holders. Together, these mechanisms explain how social class origin shapes entrepreneurs' social mobility—the entrepreneurs' transition between social class origin and destination over time.

The primary contribution of this review is to integrate the rich but fragmented body of research on entrepreneurs' early access to various forms of capital into a cohesive discussion of when and how social class origin influences entrepreneurship and social mobility. Several practical implications follow: individuals from lower social class origins are less likely to start businesses, face unique challenges in the entrepreneurial process, and experience fewer opportunities for upward social mobility—highlighting the need to incorporate social class considerations in inclusive entrepreneurship programs. At the same time, emerging research reveals that upwardly mobile entrepreneurs from lower social class origins often possess unique strengths. Thus, ignoring social class origin not only reinforces inequality but also risks overlooking substantial entrepreneurial potential.

## 2. Introduction

Social class origin has received growing attention in academic research, particularly in the wake of renewed interest in inequality, mobility, and opportunity (Kish-Gephart et al., 2023). Broadly defined, social class origin refers to the “relative social rankings of organizational members based on differences in economic capital (i.e., wealth), social capital (i.e., networks and connections), and cultural capital (i.e., cultural tastes and practices)” shaped by experiences during childhood or at birth (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013, p. 671).<sup>1</sup> Building on this momentum in organizational studies, recent work in entrepreneurship has begun to examine how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial trajectories (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023; Ge et al., 2022; Rider et al., 2023). This growing interest is partly fueled by the enduring narrative of entrepreneurs as a pathway to upward mobility—the classic “rags to riches” story (Ge et al., 2022; Rider et al., 2023).<sup>2</sup> However, emerging evidence suggests that social class origin creates lasting advantages or disadvantages that shape entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes (Hayward et al., 2022; Jayawarna et al., 2014a, 2014b). These developments call for a comprehensive, integrative review of the literature on social class origin in entrepreneurship.

While prior literature reviews have examined related themes—such as the relationship between inequality and entrepreneurship (Bruton et al., 2021; Sutter et al., 2019) or entrepreneurship as a solution to poverty (Kimmitt et al., 2020)—few have directly addressed social class origin as a central construct. Other reviews of family capital and entrepreneurship (Dyer et al., 2014) overlook broader social class contexts such as neighborhoods or schools. Similarly, although social class origin has begun to feature in organizational research (Kish-Gephart et al., 2023; Loignon and Woehr, 2018; Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019), this work rarely integrates insights from entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup> Synthesizing the entrepreneurship literature on social class origin thus promises both conceptual clarity and theoretical advancement.

Research has made important strides by examining how singular early-life conditions such as parental income, education, and occupation influence entrepreneurship. Yet much of this work treats these early-life conditions in isolation, often without explicit use of social class language and engagement with social class theories. Applying richer theoretical perspectives could deepen understanding of how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial action and outcomes. For instance, social-cognitive theories of social class (Kraus et al., 2012) could help explain how individuals from lower (vs. higher) social class origins navigate uncertainty and resource constraints in entrepreneurial settings. Socio-cultural class theories (Stephens et al., 2012) could shed light on how social class environments shape norms regarding orientations toward others, affecting the independent or interdependent behavior of entrepreneurs. A Bourdieusian perspective on social class (Bourdieu, 1984) could reveal how early access to capital and socialization can either restrict or facilitate social mobility. Taken together, these perspectives underscore the value of examining the multidimensional mechanisms that link social class origin to entrepreneurial pathways.

Despite these opportunities, the diversity of conceptual frameworks and disciplinary approaches across psychology, sociology, and economics (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe, 2000; Wright, 2005) has made it difficult to synthesize existing research on this topic. To connect disparate literatures—including Bourdieusian capital forms (Bourdieu, 1984), sociocultural and social-cognitive models (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2012), and studies using social class indicators without explicitly referencing the concept—we conduct a systematic integrative review (Cronin and George, 2020). This review is guided by three central questions: *What is an entrepreneur's social class origin? How does social class origin influence entrepreneurial outcomes and social mobility? How should future entrepreneurship research address social class origin?*

To answer these questions, we analyzed 219 articles from across disciplines. We organized and synthesized the literature around

<sup>1</sup> To consolidate, synthesize, compare across studies, and show overarching patterns throughout the paper, we often distinguish between those from “lower social class origins” and “higher social class origins.” However, we recognize that social class is not dichotomous; instead, individuals vary in their volume and composition of capital (Swartz, 1997), and we try to highlight its complexity when relevant to a specific study.

<sup>2</sup> We employ a broad understanding of entrepreneurship that includes the creation of new ventures and self-employment (Bruton et al., 2021; Gartner, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for a comprehensive overview of prior reviews.

key dimensions of social class origin, including different forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social), objective indicators (income, education, and occupation), subjective impressions, sources (family, neighborhood, school), and the timing of their impact (childhood vs. current). Through inductive coding, we identified three integrative themes that explain how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes: *entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer*, *entrepreneurial habitus formation*, and *access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations*. We then show how these mechanisms relate to entrepreneurs' social mobility, defined as transitions across class positions over time.

Our review makes two core contributions. First, we integrate a fragmented body of research into a cohesive framework that explains how entrepreneurs' social class origins impact entrepreneurial outcomes and, ultimately, social mobility. Second, drawing on contemporary entrepreneurship literature and social class theories, we outline three directions for future research: (1) we advocate for research that explicitly engages with social class terminology and theory, adopts a multidimensional approach to social class origin, and applies an intersectional lens; (2) we encourage future research to examine how social class origin can spur biases in evaluations; and (3) we call for a more explicit investigation of entrepreneurs' mobility trajectories, using richer conceptualizations of class destinations and more nuanced markers of social mobility within and beyond entrepreneurship.

### 3. Theoretical background: Social class origin

Social class has long been a subject of scholarly interest across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and economics (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe, 2000; Marx and Engels, 1978; Wright, 2005).<sup>4</sup> Across these disciplines, social class is generally regarded as a multidimensional construct (Côté, 2024), typically comprising two key distinctions. First, scholars differentiate between the objective and subjective dimensions of social class. Most disciplines focus on objective indicators, which include quantifiable attributes such as income, education, and occupation (Côté, 2011). Subjective indicators, by contrast, refer to an individual's perception of their relative position in the social hierarchy, often based on these objective indicators (Adler et al., 2000).<sup>5</sup> Second, social class can be conceptualized in terms of both current social class and social class origin. While the former refers to an individual's social class at the time of observation (Côté, 2024), the latter pertains to the social class of individuals during their upbringing (e.g., Ingram and Oh, 2022).

In this review, we focus specifically on *social class origin*, which we define as an individual's access to economic, social, and cultural capital through childhood or birth. We adopt a broad perspective that includes capital accessed not only through family members (Côté, 2024) and guardians (Martin and Côté, 2019) but also through peers (Chetty et al., 2022), neighborhoods (Chetty et al., 2016), and gateway institutions (e.g., educational institutions; Stephens et al., 2014). This broader focus reflects the understanding that individuals are embedded in multiple contexts through which they access and accumulate capital. For example, social capital at the community level—via interactions with teachers, adults from higher social classes, or peers from diverse social backgrounds—is a crucial driver of social mobility outcomes (Chetty, 2021; Chetty et al., 2024).

We focus on social class origin for two primary reasons. First, foundational research on social class (Bourdieu, 1984) shows that social class experienced through childhood or birth is formative, shaping enduring dispositions. Early life access to economic, social, and cultural capital contributes to the development of a social class "habitus"—a psychological imprint or "cultural grammar" that influences how individuals think, feel, and behave (Bourdieu, 1984; Swartz, 1997). Notably, this imprint can persist even when individuals move to a different social class later in life. For example, research finds that top executives' social class origins continue to influence their risk-taking attitudes (Kish-Gephart and Campbell, 2015) and leadership styles (Martin et al., 2016). Second, an entrepreneur's starting point is crucial for resource mobilization, a central aspect of entrepreneurial action (Clough et al., 2019). By focusing on social class origin, we can better understand disparities in entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes rooted in early life conditions. This perspective also allows us to assess whether and how entrepreneurship serves as a pathway for social mobility (Lindquist and Vladasel, 2025; Rider et al., 2023).

### 4. Review method

We conducted an integrative review of the literature on social class origin and entrepreneurship. Integrative reviews are particularly suited for emergent research areas, providing a comprehensive approach to reviewing, critiquing, and redirecting the literature (Torraco, 2005). By synthesizing fragmented conversations, integrative reviews help overcome research silos and generate meaningful research agendas (Bacq et al., 2021; Elsbach and van Knippenberg, 2020). While there are different ways to conduct integrative reviews, we followed recent recommendations by Cronin and George (2020) and modeled our approach on exemplary applications in the field (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Salvi et al., 2022).<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1. Data collection

Our review began with the process of defining our search terms, which involved four steps. First, we drew from prior literature

<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the multidisciplinary nature of social class, accompanying paradigms, and approaches, see Kish-Gephart et al., 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for an overview of conceptualizations and operationalizations of social class origin.

<sup>6</sup> We provide a step-by-step description of the main steps and decisions in Appendix 3, including the exact search strings and codebooks.

reviews on social class across disciplines to identify an initial list of relevant search terms (e.g., Kish-Gephart et al., 2023; Loignon and Woehr, 2018). Second, we reviewed definitions of social class origin in adjacent disciplines, adding search terms not captured in previous reviews (e.g., “intergenerational mobility”). Third, we sought and incorporated feedback from five subject matter experts from different disciplines (management, sociology, and social psychology) and perspectives (both Western and non-Western) to ensure robustness in our search terms. Fourth, we refined our terms to capture both *explicit* (e.g., “socioeconomic origin” and “intergenerational mobility”) and *implicit* (e.g., “income,” “education,” and “occupation”) references to social class origin, including those derived from Bourdieusian capital forms.

In this review, we distinguish between implicit and explicit approaches to studying social class origin. The implicit approach measures social class origin using forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) or objective indicators (occupation, education, income) without explicitly employing social class terminology or theory. In contrast, the explicit approach foregrounds the term “social class origin” or related synonyms. Given the relatively nascent stage of explicit social class research in entrepreneurship (e.g., Anderson and Miller, 2003) compared to the extensive body of implicit research (e.g., Aldrich and Kim, 2007; Dunn and Holtz-Eakin, 2000), we include both approaches to provide a comprehensive account. We then combined these class-related search terms with entrepreneurship-related keywords (e.g., “self-employment” or “entrepreneurship”).<sup>7</sup>

Based on the finalized list of search terms, we conducted a search using: (a) terms capturing explicit conceptualizations across journals of all ranks in disciplines related to entrepreneurship (e.g., economics, finance, psychology, sociology) and (b) terms capturing implicit conceptualizations in all 4\*, 4- and 3-ranked journals included in the 2021 ABS Academic Journal Guide (see Appendix 3). In total, we included 1108 journals. This approach ensures a robust sample (cf. Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021) representative of the multidisciplinary nature of research on social class origin. Following Loignon and Woehr’s (2018), we searched the title, abstract, and keywords of articles on *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, with no date restrictions (through September 2024). After removing duplicates, our search yielded 6192 journal articles.

We then applied a series of exclusion criteria to remove articles that did not address (a) social class (e.g., focusing on other sources of identity like race or gender instead), (b) entrepreneurship (e.g., studies focused on non-organizational outcomes or established organizations), or (c) social class origin (e.g., focusing on current social class). To minimize subjectivity, the first two authors independently assessed a 30 % sample of articles and reconciled discrepancies (Campbell et al., 2013). After alignment, the second author assessed the remaining articles, referring to full texts when necessary. This process reduced the initial sample to 193 articles.

To fully capture the emerging literature explicitly referencing social class origin as a theoretical concept (Cronin and George, 2020), we followed standard protocols for snowball sampling (Hiebl, 2023; Wohlin et al., 2022), starting from articles that explicitly referenced social class origin. In the backward search, we retrieved all English-language references cited by our focal articles from *Scopus*. In the forward search, we retrieved all articles citing the focal articles.<sup>8</sup> This snowball sampling yielded 1814 articles. After removing duplicates and applying the same exclusion criteria, we added 26 relevant articles to our final sample, resulting in a final dataset of 219 articles published between 1965 and 2024.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.2. Data analysis

To understand the relationship between social class origin, entrepreneurial outcomes, and social mobility, we conducted the analysis in three steps. First, we categorized each article by key descriptive attributes related to our review themes: social class origin, entrepreneurial outcomes, and social mobility (cf. Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). To do so, the second author extracted data on: (a) the article’s focus and main findings, (b) dimensions of social class origin (objective vs. subjective indicators), (c) whether the article addressed social class origin and mobility explicitly or implicitly, (d) the specific entrepreneurial outcome examined (e.g., entry, performance, behavior), and (e) intersectionality (e.g., how social class origin intersects with gender, ethnicity, race, migration history, and/or age). We also coded contextual details, including the country, sample, article type (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), methodology, and paradigmatic approach (positivist, interpretivist, or critical).

In the second step, we focused on unraveling how social class origin impacts entrepreneurial outcomes, following Cronin and George’s (2020) suggestions. Each of the 219 articles was coded inductively to identify integrative themes forming the basis of our theoretical framework (cf. Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Salvi et al., 2022). Specifically, the second author inductively identified how social class origin influences entrepreneurial outcomes in each study, generating 187 first-order codes. To reach a higher level of abstraction (Gioia et al., 2013), the first and second authors independently grouped these codes into second-order themes. Disagreements—mainly due to different interpretations of the same codes—were resolved through discussions among the first three authors, resulting in a coherent coding scheme (Grodal et al., 2021). These efforts distilled the initial codes into seven second-order themes, representing mechanisms through which social class origin impacts entrepreneurial outcomes.

Finally, we synthesized the second-order themes into high-order integrative themes (Cronin and George, 2020), focusing on their interrelationships and refining the language to clarify conceptual boundaries (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). This resulted in three main integrative themes: *entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer*, *entrepreneurial habitus formation*, and *access to entrepreneurial networks and*

<sup>7</sup> We added asterisks (\*) to our search terms to allow for a search of variants of our search terms. We employed the Boolean operator “OR” to simultaneously search for synonyms. Lastly, we employed the Boolean operator “AND” to combine our search terms into sequences that reflect “social class origin” and “entrepreneurship.” See Appendix 4 for a final list of search terms and our search string.

<sup>8</sup> We restricted the articles from the forward search to the previously selected journals ranked 3 to 4\* (2021 ABS AJG).

<sup>9</sup> Please refer to Appendix 5 for the full search funnel.

evaluations. Each theme captures an integrative mechanism through which social class origin influences entrepreneurial outcomes and, subsequently, social mobility.<sup>10</sup>

In parallel with this process, we refined codes related to entrepreneurial outcomes to develop second-order themes, which were then synthesized into three categories: *initializing a business* (e.g., desirability and feasibility, entrepreneurial intentions), *starting a business* (e.g., becoming an entrepreneur, type of entry), and *advancing a business* (e.g., strategic orientation, resource acquisition, performance). To examine how social class origin shapes entrepreneurs' social mobility, we coded each article based on (a) whether it refers to social mobility implicitly or explicitly, (b) whether it addresses intragenerational or intergenerational mobility, (c) the starting point and endpoint of entrepreneurs' social mobility, and (d) the role of social class origin in this mobility process. We identified three main types of entrepreneurs' social mobility: *relative to social class origins*, *relative to the labor market*, and *relative to entrepreneurial entry*, each encompassing *social reproduction* and *social disruption* as contrasting roles of social class origins in entrepreneurs' mobility process. These themes are elaborated in the sections that follow.

## 5. What is an entrepreneur's social class origin?

Our inductive analysis surfaced a multidimensional framework of social class origin, aligned with Bourdieu's emphasis on economic, cultural, and social capital.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the objective dimension of social class origin, entrepreneurs face advantages or disadvantages depending on their access to these various forms of capital through childhood or birth—most often captured via family income, occupation, and education (Côté, 2024). For example, being born into a wealthy family may provide financial gifts or an inheritance that can be used to start or grow a business (Blanchflower and Oswald, 1998). Parental occupation also matters: entrepreneurs tend to have better starting conditions when their parents are successful entrepreneurs (Mungai and Velamuri, 2011; Solimanof et al., 2021), hold political positions (Jia et al., 2021), or occupy higher occupational roles (Honig, 1998). Educationally, factors such as the school prestige (Falck et al., 2012; Heilbrunn and Almor, 2014), parental educational attainment (Johansen and Clausen, 2011), and informal education of entrepreneurial skills during childhood (Lentz and Laband, 1990) have all been linked to entrepreneurial outcomes.

These objective indicators also shape individuals' subjective perceptions of their social class origin (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023), which refers to their perceived position in the social hierarchy (Côté, 2011, 2024). While the literature has predominantly focused on objective indicators, a few studies consider subjective dimensions—for instance, self-assessed class rank (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Wolfe and Patel, 2017) or childhood experiences of financial hardship (Drennan et al., 2005; Jiang, 2024).<sup>12</sup> Recognizing both objective and subjective dimensions of social class origin is crucial, as subjective perceptions can influence entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes in ways not fully captured by objective indicators alone (Côté, 2024).

The multidimensionality of social class origin also extends to its sources. While parents are typically viewed as the primary source of class-related (dis)advantages (Aldrich et al., 1998; Jayawarna et al., 2014a, 2014b), research also points to the formative role of neighborhoods (Markussen and Røed, 2017; Wixe, 2020) and broader communities (Slade Shantz et al., 2018). Moreover, the timing of when social class origin exerts its influence is important: some studies explore how early-life social class during childhood creates lasting influences on entrepreneurial behavior (Andric et al., 2024; Obschonka et al., 2013), while others focus on capital transfers in adulthood, such as inheritance or family gifts, that stem from one's origin but are realized later in life (Elston et al., 2016).

Our review of the literature revealed key differences in how implicit and explicit research conceptualizes social class origin. Implicit studies often rely on single objective indicators of social class origin and tend to overlook the interplay between different forms of capital (e.g., Hurst and Lusardi, 2004).<sup>13</sup> In contrast, explicit research takes a more holistic approach, offering formal definitions of social class origin and measuring it using multiple indicators (e.g., Anderson and Miller, 2003). Explicit research also more frequently engages with social class theories (e.g., Aldrich et al., 1998; Mafico et al., 2024), drawing on foundational works by Weber (1930), Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe et al., 1980), and Bourdieu (1984, 1986) to explain focal relationships.

Despite these advances, substantial opportunities remain for further theorizing how social class origin shapes entrepreneurial trajectories and for integrating social class perspectives more deeply in entrepreneurship research.

## 6. How does entrepreneurs' social class origin impact entrepreneurial outcomes?

This section examines the integrative themes and underlying mechanisms that explain how social class origin relates to entrepreneurial outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, we focus on three integrative themes: entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer, entrepreneurial habitus formation, and access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations (see Table 1). By explicating their mechanisms and interrelationships, we provide an understanding of the role of social class origin in how entrepreneurs initialize a business (i.e.,

<sup>10</sup> Please refer to Appendices 6–8 for in-depth detail on the data structure, inter-coder agreement, and the codebook.

<sup>11</sup> Please refer to Appendix 10 for an overview of implicit and explicit research across the multiple dimensions.

<sup>12</sup> Around 3 % of articles in our sample utilize subjective indicators to conceptualize social class origin.

<sup>13</sup> Please refer to Appendix 9 for an overview of the evolution of implicit / explicit research, integrative themes and perspectives, and type of research (i.e., qualitative / quantitative) across the integrative themes.

<sup>14</sup> We understand mechanisms as the explaining link “between input and output, or between explanans and explanandum.” (Hedström and Swedberg, 1996, p. 288). Our focus on mechanisms allows us to investigate the social “cogs and wheels” (Elster, 1989, p. 3) that explain the link between social class origin and entrepreneurial outcomes.

desirability and feasibility, entrepreneurial intentions), start a business (i.e., becoming an entrepreneur, type of entry), and advance a business (i.e., strategic orientation, resource acquisition, performance).

*Desirability and feasibility* refer to the attitudes, identities, and passion individuals develop toward entrepreneurship, as well as their perceived entrepreneurial competencies and self-efficacy. *Entrepreneurial intentions* capture the individual's aim or motivation to engage in entrepreneurial action. *Becoming an entrepreneur* refers to the act of transitioning into entrepreneurship. *Type of entry* encompasses different modes of this transition, including solo self-employment versus growth-oriented entrepreneurship, necessity entrepreneurship versus opportunity entrepreneurship, or incorporated versus unincorporated forms of entrepreneurship. *Strategic orientation* describes entrepreneurial mindsets and behaviors at the venture level, such as risk-taking and prosocial orientation. *Resource acquisition* includes various forms of venture funding, such as venture capital and family funding, as well as access to other resources, such as information and entrepreneurial opportunities. Finally, *performance* pertains to venture outcomes such as growth (e.g., employee or revenue growth), profitability (e.g., entrepreneurial income), and survival (e.g., persistence or failure).<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that the timing of when social class origin matters differs across the reviewed articles. Some studies indicate that individuals already occupy different class positions, as evidenced through markers like education, occupation, or income, prior to initializing a business. Other studies emphasize that even among individuals with similar current social class markers (e.g., comparable levels of educational attainment), social class origin continues to impact entrepreneurial outcomes. This is consistent with findings in the broader organizational literature on social class, which suggest that the effects of a lower social class origin can persist and continue to influence behavior even among those who have climbed the social ladder (Kish-Gephart and Campbell, 2015).

In our overarching framework (see Fig. 1), we illustrate how the integrative themes help explain the relationships between social class origin and social mobility, as mediated through entrepreneurial outcomes. While the arrows in the figure represent the overall process from origin to mobility, the following sections delve into the specific relationships within each integrative theme in greater detail. Because our objective is to advance understanding of social class origin in entrepreneurship, we identify critical issues within each theme and use them as a foundation for a comprehensive research agenda.

### 6.1. Entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer

One of the primary themes in entrepreneurship is the challenge of resource constraints (Clough et al., 2019; Stinchcombe, 1965). This theme recognizes that entrepreneurs often rely heavily on financial and human capital from family, friends, and neighbors, particularly in the early stages of venture creation (Levine and Rubinstein, 2017). Applying a social class lens to this discussion is especially apt, as Bourdieu's foundational social class theory posits that social classes differ in the volume of capital they possess—where upper classes hold abundant capital and lower classes have limited access (Swartz, 1997). Compared to more intangible forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital, financial and human capital can be more directly deployed in the entrepreneurial process. This immediate convertibility of capital into economic rewards is a key element of a Bourdieusian perspective on social class.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, in our review, we identify entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer—including financial and human capital transfers—as a key mechanism through which social class origin influences entrepreneurial outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

Studies within this theme examine entrepreneurs' immediate resource advantages or disadvantages based on their social class origin. Two underlying mechanisms are prominent: the inheritance of financial resources, which eases liquidity constraints, and the shaping of general and specific human capital investments and outcomes. Table 2 presents each underlying topic alongside representative studies illustrating how these mechanisms shape entrepreneurial outcomes.

#### 6.1.1. Transferring financial capital

Liquidity constraints pose a major barrier for entrepreneurs (Holtz-Eakin et al., 1994). Because capital markets often underfund new ventures due to inherent risks, entrepreneurs commonly turn to personal sources such as family and friends (Basu and Parker, 2001). Social class origin play a pivotal role in the ability to overcome such liquidity constraints. Those from higher-class backgrounds are more likely to receive inheritances (Blanchflower and Oswald, 1998) or transfers of financial capital from family members (Blumberg and Pfann, 2016). While many studies implicitly address social class origins through parental income, family financial capital, or inheritance, others take a more explicit approach by conceptualizing social class origin in terms of family socioeconomic status across multiple dimensions, such as parental income and occupation.<sup>18</sup>

The transfer of financial capital mainly influences outcomes related to starting and advancing a business. Since different types of entrepreneurship require varying levels of financial capital, findings are mixed regarding whether a wealthy class origin increases the

<sup>15</sup> While we derived these broader categories of entrepreneurial outcomes to generate a general model of social class origin and entrepreneurship, we discuss specific outcomes of individual studies in the following sections.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu defined economic capital by its direct convertibility to financial rewards. Due to the inherent relationship between investments in human capital and economic profits in the labor market (Becker, 1964; Bourdieu, 1986), previous research has coalesced indicators of financial and human capital into one category and differentiated them from cultural and social capital (Loignon and Woehr, 2018). In Bourdieu's forms of capital, there is an overlap between what he understands as institutionalized cultural capital (i.e., academic degrees) and what Becker (1964) conceptualizes as general human capital. However, Bourdieu acknowledges the close relationship of educational degrees to economic capital. Specific forms of cultural capital, such as embodied norms and values, are part of our review's *Entrepreneurial Habitus* mechanism.

<sup>17</sup> Nearly half of the reviewed articles ( $n = 103$ : 78 implicit and 25 explicit) address entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer.

<sup>18</sup> Across our reviewed articles on transferring financial capital, 46 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly, and 17 explicitly.

**Table 1**  
Three integrative themes on social class origin in entrepreneurship.

|   | Entrepreneurial Finance and Skills Transfer  | Entrepreneurial Habitus Formation  | Access to Entrepreneurial Networks and Evaluations   |
|---|--|--|--|
| <i>How is Social Class Origin understood?</i> | Resource   | Cognition and Experience   | Barrier / Enabler  |
| <i>Main Forms of Capital</i>                  | Financial Capital, Human Capital   | Cultural Capital   | Social Capital   |
| <i>Main Focus</i>                             | Resource (dis)advantage of entrepreneurs   | Imprints in entrepreneurial cognition and action   | Uneven access to networks and positive evaluations   |
| <i>Main Theories</i>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Embeddedness Perspective</li> <li>• Human Capital Theory</li> <li>• Liquidity Constraints</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Cognitive Career Theory</li> <li>• Social Learning Theory</li> <li>• Theory of Planned Behavior</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional Theory</li> <li>• Social Capital Theory</li> <li>• Social Similarity</li> </ul> |

likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur (e.g., [Edelman et al., 2016](#); [Sieger and Minola, 2017](#)). Some studies argue that individuals become entrepreneurs either due to financial limitations (e.g., necessity entrepreneurs) or in spite of those limitations (e.g., underdog entrepreneurs). At the same time, the type of entrepreneurship individuals pursue at entry—such as incorporated versus self-employed forms—is clearly linked to their social class origin. Incorporated entrepreneurship, which typically demands more financial capital, is more accessible to those who receive financial support from higher-class families ([Levine and Rubinstein, 2017](#)). Furthermore, entrepreneurs from wealthier origins may be better positioned to survive liquidity constraints after entry ([Åstebro and Bernhardt, 2003](#)). While these individuals can rely on external resource acquisition ([Au and Kwan, 2009](#)), dependence on family financing might reduce their propensity to seek out external resources ([Zaccaria, 2023](#)).

These mixed findings highlight the need to explore the boundary conditions under which class-based financial transfers ease liquidity constraints. These may include factors such as family embeddedness ([Au and Kwan, 2009](#)), venture type ([Jayawarna et al., 2014a, 2014b; Vladasel et al., 2021](#)), and venture stage ([Edelman et al., 2016](#)). Additionally, drawing on an intersectionality lens ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)), the effectiveness of class-based financial transfers may depend on other sources of identity—such as gender, race, ethnicity, or migrant status—which may compound advantages or disadvantages ([Li and Song, 2024; Mafico et al., 2024](#)).

### 6.1.2. Transferring human capital

Entrepreneurs must master various tasks, making entrepreneurial skills central to their success ([Lazear, 2005](#)). Higher levels of human capital are frequently associated with better entrepreneurial performance ([Marvel et al., 2016](#)). At the same time, the uneven distribution of human capital is one of the most central explanations for economic inequality ([Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961](#)). Research on social class has shown that parents from higher social classes often take more active roles in cultivating their children's human capital, which directly affects their educational achievement and skill development ([Lareau, 2015](#)). Social class origin is also linked to both access to and success in higher education institutions, as demonstrated in studies on college entry ([Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Whiston and Keller, 2004](#)) and graduation rates ([NCES, 2019](#)). Most reviewed articles refer to social class origins implicitly, typically via parental occupation or education, while a smaller number of articles explicitly conceptualize social class origins using multiple dimensions.<sup>19</sup>

Our review found that literature on human capital transfer distinguishes between general and specific forms of human capital. First, the transfer of general human capital is often described as parental support for high-quality education, which equips children with a broad set of skills and knowledge. This type of transfer mainly influences outcomes related to initializing and starting a business. Parents with higher levels of formal education—typically from higher social classes—tend to foster greater academic success in their children ([Jayawarna et al., 2014a, 2014b; Kolstad and Wiig, 2013](#)). In turn, higher levels of general human capital may increase the likelihood of initial entrepreneurial entry ([Parker and van Praag, 2012](#)) and performance throughout the entrepreneurial process ([Andric et al., 2024](#)).

Second, the transfer of specific human capital refers to skills and knowledge directly applicable to entrepreneurship. This mechanism primarily affects outcomes associated with initializing and advancing a business. Children often acquire entrepreneurial skills (e.g., how to be a manager: [Lentz and Laband, 1990](#)) by observing or working with their parents—particularly those from higher social classes—who model managerial behaviors during childhood and adolescence ([Badghish et al., 2023; Estrada-Robles et al., 2021](#)). Learning such skills from parents or mentors during childhood influences not only the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur ([Eesley and Wang, 2017](#)) but also the type of entrepreneurship pursued. For instance, exposure to parental occupations may help individuals identify attractive sectors to enter as entrepreneurs—what [Hvide and Oyer \(2018\)](#) term “dinner table human capital.” In contrast, lack of exposure to entrepreneurial human capital may hinder performance throughout the entrepreneurial process, leading to lower earnings ([Lentz and Laband, 1990](#)), particularly for marginalized entrepreneurs ([Fairlie and Robb, 2007; Heilbrunn and Almor, 2014](#)).

A limitation of the current literature is its predominant focus on human capital transfer from entrepreneurial parents, often overlooking the broader social class environments, such as schools or neighborhoods. Social class theory suggests that individuals who experience changes in social class status (class transitioners) may develop unique skills, abilities, and insights from their exposure to multiple class contexts ([Martin and Côté, 2019](#)). As such, human capital may also be transferred through other channels beyond the family, including interactions with coworkers, customers, after-school programs, and extracurricular activities. In sum, current

<sup>19</sup> Across our reviewed articles on transferring human capital, 53 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly, and 12 explicitly.

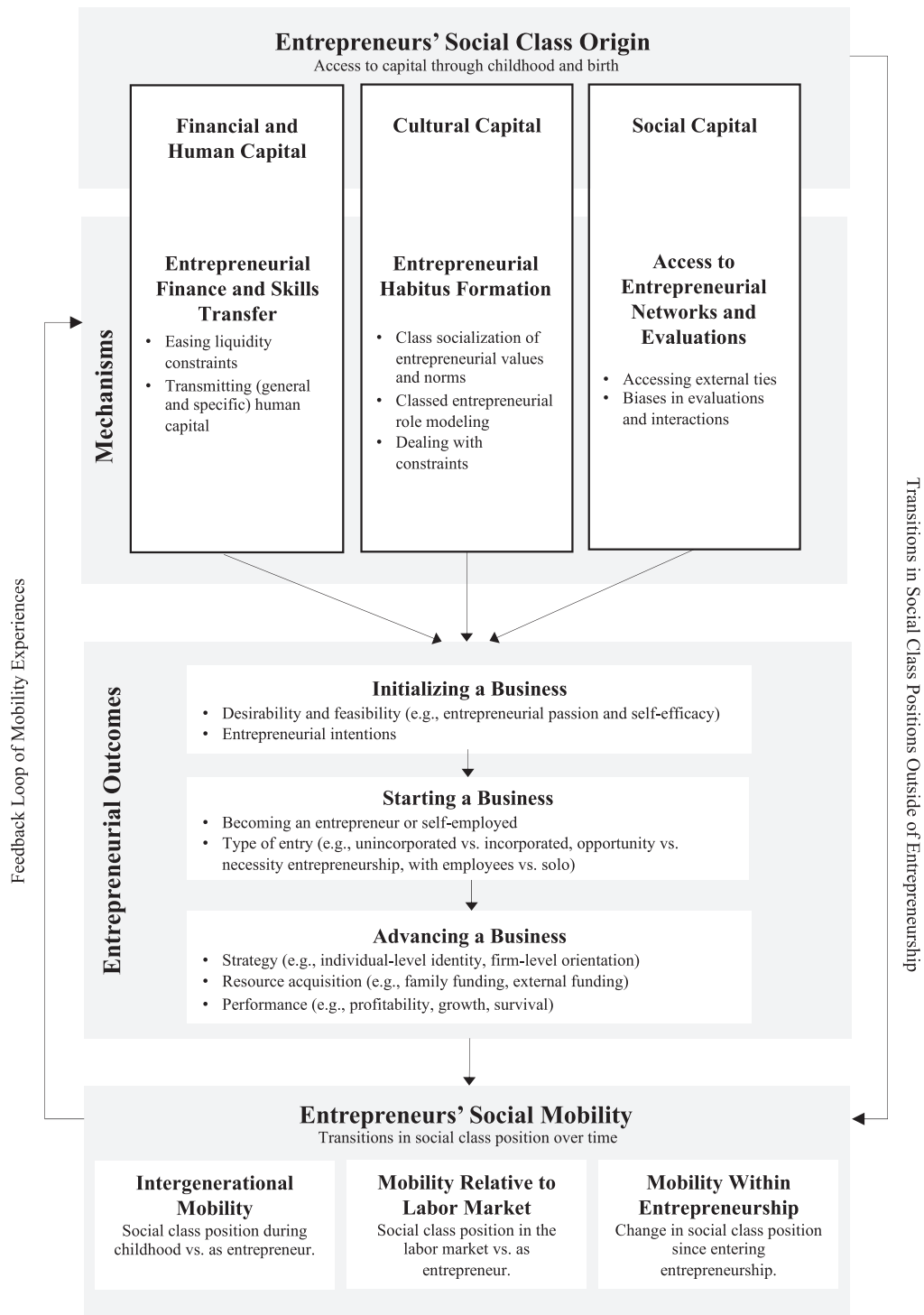


Fig. 1. A framework for how social class origin impacts entrepreneurs' social mobility.

**Table 2**

An overview of entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer.

| Topics                                | Mechanisms   | Entrepreneurial Outcomes and Example Studies   |   |   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
|                                       |  | Initializing a business  | Starting a business   | Advancing a business  |
| <i>Transferring financial capital</i> | Easing liquidity constraints: Social class origin (e.g., through inheritance or gifts) offers financial resources needed for venture foundation and growth.  | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Badghish et al. (2023), Balasundaram et al. (2024)<br><i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Sieger and Minola (2017), Wang et al. (2021) | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Blanchflower and Oswald (1998), Holtz-Eakin et al. (1994)<br><i>Type of entry</i><br>Brändle and Kuckertz (2022), Vladasel et al. (2021) | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>Braun and Sieger (2021)<br><br><i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Au and Kwan (2009), Rouse and Jayawarna (2011) <i>Performance</i><br>Bird and Wennberg (2016), Mafico et al. (2024)   |
| <i>Transferring human capital</i>     | Transmitting (general and specific) human capital: Social class origin (e.g., through parents' education and learning from successful business owners) fosters educational attainments and skills directly employable in entrepreneurship. | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Badghish et al. (2023), Heilbrunn and Almor (2014)<br><i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Krieger et al. (2022), Wang et al. (2023)    | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Aldrich et al. (1998), Dunn and Holtz-Eakin (2000)<br><i>Type of entry</i><br>Hayward et al. (2022), Yu et al. (2023)                    | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>Slade Shantz et al. (2018), Trappmann et al. (2024)<br><br><i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Jayawarna et al. (2014a, 2014b), Rouse and Jayawarna (2011) <i>Performance</i><br>Andric et al. (2024), Kolstad and Wiig (2013) |

Note: 23 of the 103 articles on entrepreneurial finance and skills relate to how entrepreneurs initialize a business, 56 to how they start a business, and 39 to how they advance a business. Articles can simultaneously address multiple outcomes.

literature emphasizes the immediate advantages in financial and human capital afforded by a higher social class origin, pointing to a need for future research to consider the broader class environment and alternative sources of critical capital.

## 6.2. Entrepreneurial habitus formation

The debate about whether entrepreneurs are born or made has long been central to entrepreneurship research (Gartner, 1988). Over time, the field has shifted from a focus on innate personality traits to a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial cognition and action (Mitchell et al., 2002; Shepherd et al., 2015). This shift highlights the importance of entrepreneurs' socialization during formative periods, such as childhood, and its lasting imprints on entrepreneurial actions (Obschonka, 2016). The concept of social class origin, as a critical component of early socialization and the transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), offers valuable insights into these processes.

Our review identifies entrepreneurial habitus formation as an integrative theme that explains how entrepreneurs' social class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Broadly defined, habitus refers to a person's "deeply structured cultural grammar for action" (Swartz, 1997, p. 102), which informs their normative ways of interacting with others and institutions. The reviewed literature suggests that growing up within specific social class contexts fosters the development of an entrepreneurial habitus—comprising dispositions, expectations, and actions specific to entrepreneurship. This class-shaped habitus includes mental schemas that influence how individuals think, feel, and behave throughout the entrepreneurial process.

Specifically, social class environments of origin influence individuals' values and norms (e.g., autonomy, independence), exposure to entrepreneurial role models, and development of entrepreneurship-relevant cognition, such as risk attitude and perceived agency. Table 3 outlines these mechanisms and highlights illustrative studies demonstrating their effects on entrepreneurial outcomes.

### 6.2.1. Entrepreneurial values and norms

Personal values and social norms are foundational to entrepreneurial decision-making (Hemingway, 2005; Holland and Shepherd, 2013). These elements help shape the mission and identity of new ventures (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). Research in established organizations indicates that individuals' social class origin influences the development of such values (Hout, 1984; Miller and Swanson, 1958; Snibbe and Markus, 2005) and contributes to variation in occupational choices (Fang and Tilcsik, 2022) and individuals' behavior within organizations (Côté et al., 2021; Kish-Gephart et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2016). Most of the reviewed articles refer to social class origin implicitly through indicators such as parental occupation, though those that adopt an explicit conceptualization often include multiple indicators or track occupational mobility across generations.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Overall, 68 % ( $n = 149$ : 117 implicit and 32 explicit) of the reviewed articles addressed entrepreneurial habitus formation, and from these articles, three sub-mechanisms emerged.

<sup>21</sup> Across our reviewed articles on entrepreneurial values and norms, 61 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly, and 20 explicitly.

**Table 3**  
An overview of entrepreneurial habitus formation.

| Topics                                       | Mechanisms  | Entrepreneurial Outcomes and Example Studies   |   |   |
|--|---|--|---|---|
|  |   | Initializing a business  | Starting a business   | Advancing a business  |
| <i>Entrepreneurial values and norms</i>      | Classed socialization of entrepreneurial values and norms: Individuals acquire cultural tastes and behavior relevant to entrepreneurship in their class environments of origin.   | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Halaby (2003), Staniewski et al. (2024)           | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Abada et al. (2014), Mungai and Velamuri (2011)      | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>Sentuti and Cesaroni (2024a), Wyrwich (2015)  |
|  |   | <i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Laouiti et al. (2024), Tolentino et al. (2014)      | <i>Type of entry</i><br>Carroll and Mosakowski (1987), Hoffmann et al. (2015)           | <i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Bates (1997), Jayawarna et al. (2014a, 2014b)<br><i>Performance</i><br>Randolph et al. (2022), Saffu et al. (2008)           |
| <i>Classed entrepreneurial role modeling</i> | Classed entrepreneurial role modeling: Individuals experience occupational attitudes relevant to entrepreneurship in their class environment of origin.   | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Hahn et al. (2020), Soleimanof et al. (2021)      | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Chlosta et al. (2012), Greene et al. (2013)          | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>N/A   |
|  |   | <i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Aloulou et al. (2024), Palmer et al. (2021)         | <i>Type of entry</i><br>Dunn and Holtz-Eakin (2000), Vladasel et al. (2021)             | <i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Hulsink and Koek (2014), Jayawarna et al. (2014a, 2014b)<br><i>Performance</i><br>Cooper et al. (1994), Lerner et al. (1997) |
| <i>Entrepreneurial cognition</i>             | Dealing with constraints: Experiences of threat, uncertainty, and resource scarcity in social class environments of origin imprint entrepreneurial cognition (such as risk-taking, resourcefulness, self-efficacy, or rule-breaking). | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Brändle and Kuckertz (2023), Onjewu et al. (2022) | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Li and Goetz (2019), Shepherd et al. (2020)          | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>Tang et al. (2022), Trappmann et al. (2024)   |
|  |   | <i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Drennan et al. (2005), Wang et al. (2021)           | <i>Type of entry</i><br>Berglann et al. (2011), Hayward et al. (2022), Yu et al. (2023) | <i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Mafico et al. (2024), Zaccaria (2023)<br><i>Performance</i><br>Cooper et al. (1994), Yu et al. (2022)                        |

Note: 58 of the 149 articles on entrepreneurial habitus formation relate to how entrepreneurs initialize a business, 65 to how they start a business, and 41 to how they advance a business. Articles can simultaneously address multiple outcomes.

Our review suggests that social class origin imprints values and norms that shape an individual's orientation toward entrepreneurship, particularly relevant for initializing and starting a business. For example, families from lower-class contexts often emphasize bureaucratic and obedient norms, whereas families from higher-class contexts tend to promote autonomy and entrepreneurship (Halaby, 2003). This pattern aligns with broader theorizing on models of self: individuals from lower social class backgrounds often develop an interdependent self-construal, becoming more attuned to others' needs and social expectations, whereas those from higher social classes tend to develop an independent self-construal, emphasizing personal control and influence (Stephens et al., 2012). These orientations are reinforced through parenting practices, communication styles, and verbal encouragement (Hahn et al., 2021; Staniewski et al., 2024).

Socialization into values and norms conducive to entrepreneurship contributes to more positive attitudes regarding the desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurship (Wyrwich, 2015), which in turn lead to increased entrepreneurial intentions and entry (Haddoud et al., 2024; Sørensen, 2007; Su et al., 2021). Notably, those from higher social class origins are more likely to cite non-pecuniary motivations for entry, including identity-building (Sentuti and Cesaroni, 2024b) and lifestyle preferences (Vlase and Croitoru, 2019). The influence of values and norms from one's social class background extends beyond entry and affects strategic choices, such as the degree of venture commercialization (Lee and Battilana, 2020).

### 6.2.2. *Classed entrepreneurial role modeling*

Exposure to entrepreneurial role models in one's environment significantly shapes individuals' entrepreneurial aspirations and trajectories (Sørensen, 2007). Entrepreneurial role modeling, in which individuals emulate significant figures in their occupational decisions and goals (Bosma et al., 2012), primarily influences the early stages of the entrepreneurial process related to initializing and starting a business. Children often observe and internalize their parents' and close contacts' occupational experiences (Carroll and Mosakowski, 1987). However, individuals from lower social class origins tend to have less exposure to high-prestige entrepreneurial role models (Blau and Duncan, 1967), contributing to the intergenerational transmission of occupation and the reinforcement of class

stratification (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2004). Most reviewed articles address cultural capital implicitly through parental occupations, while a few explicitly conceptualize social class origins using combined indicators such as occupation and income.<sup>22</sup>

Parental role modeling has been shown to significantly shape children's entrepreneurial aspirations (Chlosta et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2021), especially with regard to starting a business. Children of successful entrepreneurs are more likely to follow entrepreneurial paths themselves (Criaco et al., 2017; Mungai and Velamuri, 2011), whereas those exposed to poorly performing parental businesses may either turn away from entrepreneurship or follow self-employment types that reproduce their parents' occupational class (e.g., Abada et al., 2014). Since entrepreneurial success and failure can manifest in various forms and scales, the implications for occupational transmission are complex and contingent.

A key limitation of the existing literature is the lack of differentiation among parental occupational classes. Different forms of entrepreneurship—such as VC-backed ventures versus small family-owned businesses—may reflect very different class positions and transmit very different occupational cues. More research is needed to understand how exposure to distinct role models shapes entrepreneurial attitudes, expectations, and actions. For example, what an entrepreneur learns from growing up in a family-run restaurant (e.g., customer interaction, hustle, resilience) may differ substantially from lessons gleaned from a parent who manages a well-funded tech startup (e.g., navigating investor relations or building partnerships).

### 6.2.3. Entrepreneurial cognition

Entrepreneurial cognition refers to how individuals think, act, and respond to entrepreneurial uncertainty (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006; Shepherd et al., 2015). Our review supports the idea that social class origin is critical in shaping these cognitive processes, influencing how individuals initialize, start, and advance a business. This is consistent with broader social class research, which has shown that cognitive dispositions such as risk-taking, resourcefulness, and self-efficacy are shaped by both objective material resources available in one's immediate environment and subjective perceptions of these resources (Kish-Gephart et al., 2023). Most of our reviewed articles reference social class origins implicitly through parental occupations, while articles explicitly conceptualizing social class origins focus on childhood socioeconomic conditions and adversity.<sup>23</sup>

One particularly important cognitive dimension is entrepreneurial agency (McMullen et al., 2021). Several articles suggest that persistent exposure to lower social class conditions can reduce perceived agency and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (e.g., Heilbrunn and Almor, 2014; Onjewu et al., 2022), while upward mobility experiences or entrepreneurial success can enhance it, especially for those from lower social class origins (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023). While this dynamic is also present in organizational contexts (Martin and Harrison, 2022; Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019), it takes on particular significance in the entrepreneurial context: entrepreneurship is often framed as a vehicle for upward mobility, yet it simultaneously demands a level of agency that individuals from a lower class background may struggle to develop—a paradox that warrants further exploration.<sup>24</sup>

To this end, emerging research considers the impact of adverse childhood experiences on entrepreneurial cognition. Studies suggest that childhood imprints like resourcefulness influence the likelihood of starting a business (Cheng et al., 2021) and shape strategies after entry, like resilience (Yu et al., 2022) and prosociality (Tang et al., 2022). Several articles in our review highlight individuals' motivation to enter entrepreneurship because of its potential for upward mobility and as a response to adverse situations (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). However, growing up in challenging environments can also foster risk-averse strategies, potentially deterring entrepreneurial entry (Zhao and Li, 2022). While a higher social class origin may provide a safety net to cushion against potential losses, allowing for more risk-taking (Hurst and Lusardi, 2004), others argue that individuals from lower social class origins may take greater risks than those from the middle class precisely because they have less to lose (Su et al., 2021). This tension remains underdeveloped in the literature and deserves closer scrutiny.

Overall, our review suggests that social class origin impacts entrepreneurial outcomes through developing an entrepreneurial habitus. Growing up in different social class contexts influences not only the values and norms individuals internalize but also the role model they observe and the mental frameworks they apply when navigating uncertainty and responding to resource constraints. These orientations influence an individual's goals, emotions, self-concept, and relationships with others and the environment (Kraus et al., 2012). They also shape how individuals engage with gateway contexts (e.g., schools or workplaces) and influence their understanding of cultural norms, such as the "right" way to think or act (Stephens et al., 2014). Incorporating these cognitive and cultural dynamics into entrepreneurship research can significantly deepen our understanding of class-based entrepreneurial cognition and outcomes.

### 6.3. Access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations

Entrepreneurs often rely on access to ideas, information, and resources from third parties to start and grow their ventures. However, prior research shows that such access is unevenly distributed and strongly influenced by the social groups to which entrepreneurs belong, as well as by the associations that resource holders ascribe to these groups (Bakker and McMullen, 2023). This issue becomes even more complex when viewed through the lens of social class, as social class origin is inherently linked to access to social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, access can be further constrained by class-based homophily (Carey et al., 2022) and stereotypes related to an entrepreneur's social class origin (Côté, 2024).

Our review identifies uneven access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations as a key integrative theme through which social

<sup>22</sup> Across our reviewed articles on classed entrepreneurial role modeling, 53 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly, and 4 explicitly.

<sup>23</sup> Across our reviewed articles on entrepreneurial cognition, 25 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly, and 11 explicitly.

<sup>24</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing us to make this interesting tension explicit in the review.

class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes.<sup>25</sup> The primary form of capital involved here is social capital. Many studies adopt a critical perspective, focusing on how unequal access to social capital reflects and reproduces structural inequality. These studies are often grounded in sociological traditions and emphasize both individual- and institutional-level processes. Table 4 outlines two central mechanisms and provides examples of studies that illustrate how they shape entrepreneurial outcomes.

### 6.3.1. Accessing external ties

Access to entrepreneurial opportunities and resources is embedded within broader social structures (Jack and Anderson, 2002). The identification of entrepreneurial opportunities and the acquisition of needed resources often depends on the availability and mobilization of social capital (Burt, 1992)—a resource that is shaped by social class origin (Bourdieu, 1984). Most articles in this mechanism use family ties as an implicit indicator of social class origin, often without references to social class theories or terminology. A smaller number of studies explicitly conceptualize social class origin by highlighting the socioeconomic status of family members as the basis for entrepreneurs' access to external ties.<sup>26</sup>

Our review suggests that external ties rooted in one's social class origin play a significant role in shaping access to opportunities and resources, primarily influencing the entrepreneurial processes of starting and advancing a business. Access to resources beyond family boundaries often depends on the strength and reach of external ties. Families can introduce entrepreneurs to valuable contacts who provide resources, advice, or funding (Edelman et al., 2016; Fragoso et al., 2020). Mobilizing these family-based external ties—especially when they include prestigious and resource-rich third parties—can be critical to securing entrepreneurial resource acquisition (Chen et al., 2015). For instance, Anderson and Miller (2003) show that an entrepreneur's social class origin strongly influences the networks they are able to access and the quality of support they receive. Overall, the evidence supports that social class origin conditions both the structure and the utility of entrepreneurial networks.

### 6.3.2. Biases in evaluations and interactions

A second, and often more insidious, mechanism through which social class origin shapes entrepreneurial outcomes involves the evaluative biases held by resource providers. Social class origin may function as an implicit evaluative criterion during interactions with resource providers. Because resource holders often operate under conditions of uncertainty and information asymmetry, they rely on heuristics, perceived quality signals, and social evaluations when deciding whether to support a new venture (Bafera and Kleinert, 2023; Zott and Huy, 2007). While a large body of entrepreneurship research has examined third-party biases related to gender or race (Bengtsson and Hsu, 2015; Jennings and Brush, 2013), much less attention has been paid to how class-based perceptions shape expectations around competence, legitimacy, and potential. Yet research from adjacent disciplines suggests that class-based stereotypes are powerful and persistent, influencing expectations around resource capacity and competence (Belmi et al., 2020; Durante et al., 2017; Fiske et al., 2002).

Although still underexplored in entrepreneurship research, some of our reviewed articles suggest that social class origin can shape how entrepreneurs are evaluated by others. Some individuals pursue entrepreneurship as a response to biased evaluations in traditional labor markets, using self-employment as an alternative to blocked mobility within formal organizations (Fairlie, 2005) or as a way to circumvent the limitations of formal educational credentials (Yiu, 2013). However, entrepreneurship may not always provide a clean escape from biased evaluations. For example, homophily in investor-entrepreneur interactions—where investors favor individuals from similar social class backgrounds—can limit access to capital for entrepreneurs from lower-class origins (e.g., see Sheares, 2024; Oh, 2025). When such biases become institutionalized—gaining “a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977 p. 341)—they contribute to the systemic reproduction of inequality.

Some reviewed studies also highlight how social class origins intersect with other institutionalized barriers. For instance, patriarchal norms can further restrict access to entrepreneurial opportunities for women from lower social class origins (Lindvert et al., 2017). While a growing number of studies are beginning to explore how these intersecting biases operate (Huang et al., 2021; Slade Shantz et al., 2018), there is still much to uncover about how evaluations shaped by class origin become institutionalized and how they interact with other sources of disadvantage in entrepreneurial settings.

## 7. How social class origins matter in entrepreneurs' social mobility

Thus far, our integrative mechanisms explain how social class origin relates to entrepreneurial outcomes. In this section, we extend the analysis to consider the role of social class origin in shaping entrepreneurs' social mobility and identify critical issues that lay the foundation for future research.

Social mobility can generally be understood as an individual's transition in social class position over time (Côté, 2024). To assess the magnitude of such transitions, it is critical to define the starting point—referred to in the social mobility literature as origins—and the endpoint, or destinations, of entrepreneurs' trajectories (Martin and Côté, 2019; Phillips et al., 2020). Our analysis surfaced three themes of social mobility, each involving different origins and destinations, drawing on different operationalizations, and connected to distinct bodies of research in the broader social mobility literature (Table 5).

First, *intergenerational mobility* research focuses on comparing entrepreneurs' social class positions with their parents' social class position, which is in line with studies of class changes or persistence between parents and their children (Blau and Duncan, 1967;

<sup>25</sup> Eighteen percent ( $n = 40$ : 27 implicit and 13 explicit) of the reviewed articles address access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations.

<sup>26</sup> Across our reviewed articles on external ties, 18 articles conceptualize social class origins implicitly and 7 conceptualize social class explicitly.

**Table 4**  
An Overview of Access to Entrepreneurial Networks and Evaluations.

| Topics  | Mechanisms  | Entrepreneurial Outcomes and Example Studies                                   |   |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
|   |   | Initializing a business  | Starting a business   | Advancing a business  |
| <i>Accessing external ties</i>                | Access to external resources or opportunities through ties: Individuals with greater social capital can more easily access relevant ties.   | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>Balasundaram et al. (2024)              | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Edelman et al. (2016), Wixe (2020)         | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>N/A   |
|   |   | <i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>Fragoso et al. (2020), Wang et al. (2021) | <i>Type of entry</i><br>Jayawarna et al. (2014a, 2014b), Jia et al. (2021)    | <i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Chen et al. (2015), Estrada-Robles et al. (2021)   |
|   |   |  |   | <i>Performance</i><br>Anderson and Miller (2003), Constantinidis et al. (2019)    |
| <i>Biases in evaluations and interactions</i> | Access to external entrepreneurial opportunities and resources through biased evaluations and interactions: Individuals ability to access external opportunities and resources can be blocked or facilitated by a third party's class-based biases. | <i>Desirability and feasibility</i><br>N/A                                     | <i>Becoming an entrepreneur</i><br>Igwe et al. (2020), Shepherd et al. (2020) | <i>Strategic orientation</i><br>Slade Shantz et al. (2018)                        |
|   |   | <i>Entrepreneurial intentions</i><br>N/A                                       | <i>Type of entry</i><br>Huang et al. (2021), Jia et al. (2021)                | <i>Resource acquisition</i><br>Lindvert et al. (2017), Rouse and Jayawarna (2011) |
|   |   |  |   | <i>Performance</i><br>Bird and Wennberg (2016), Kolstad and Wiig (2013)           |

Note: 4 of the 40 articles on entrepreneurial networks and evaluations relate to how entrepreneurs initialize a business, 18 to how they start a business, and 24 to how they advance a business. Articles can simultaneously address multiple outcomes.

Martin and Côté, 2019). Second, *mobility relative to the labor market* contrasts entrepreneurial outcomes with labor market positions, drawing on literature that views entrepreneurship as a response to blocked mobility pathways in the traditional labor market. Third, *mobility within entrepreneurship* examines shifts in social class position after entrepreneurial entry, aligning with studies of intrapreneurial mobility or advancement within organizations (Kish-Gephart et al., 2023; Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019).

Across these themes of social mobility, most studies use economic advancement to capture social mobility—such as changes in occupational status, income, or wealth—often linked to the type of entrepreneurial entry (e.g., necessity vs. opportunity), incorporation status (unincorporated vs. incorporated), or post-entry performance (e.g., entrepreneurial income, growth, profitability, and survival).<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the magnitude of social mobility, the *direction of social mobility* is a second critical dimension (Côté, 2024; Martin and Côté, 2019). Scholars continue to debate whether and to what extent individuals can change their social class positions.<sup>28</sup> Mobility direction can be *upward* or *downward*, while stability reflects immobility or class *maintenance*. While entrepreneurship is often portrayed as a vehicle for upward mobility, helping individuals improve their social class destination relative to their starting position, this is not always the case (Duncan, 1965; Fairlie, 2005). Entrepreneurial outcomes can also reflect downward mobility or reinforce existing class positions.

Across the reviewed literature, two overarching mobility patterns emerged: *social reproduction* and *social disruption*. The former emphasizes how structural (dis)advantages tied to social class origin persist through entrepreneurship. Reproduction implies that entrepreneurs from higher social class origins tend to maintain or improve their class position, while those from lower class origins often maintain or lose theirs. The latter highlights cases in which entrepreneurship enables a break from class-based constraints or disadvantages. Social disruption implies upward mobility for entrepreneurs from lower social class origins or downward mobility for entrepreneurs from higher social class origins.

Historically, the reproduction of social class origins has been central in sociological work on class and inequality (Bourdieu, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Despite the literature's focus on economic transitions, it is important to note that entrepreneurs' social mobility might also involve shifts in multiple forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984)—economic, cultural, or social—a theme we further discuss in the future research section.

<sup>28</sup> While scholars largely agree that individuals' social class can change over time, they disagree on how much change is possible. Some conceptualize social class in a way that accounts for gradual (and limited) changes over time, suggesting that one's starting position creates a limited "band of more or less probable trajectories" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114), which allows for short-range mobility (Friedman, 2015) but makes long-range mobility challenging for individuals (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Others adopt a more dynamic view of social class, suggesting class positions are more malleable and "not only can social class change within individual lifespans, but individuals also can actively work to change it" (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 3).

**Table 5**  
Three types of entrepreneurs' social mobility.

|   | Intergenerational Mobility  | Mobility Relative to the Labor Market   | Mobility Within Entrepreneurship  |
|---|---|---|---|
| <i>Starting Point of Social Mobility</i>  | Social Class Origins  | Labor Market Position   | Entrepreneurial Entry   |
| <i>How is Social Mobility Understood?</i> | Difference between childhood social class origins and social class position as entrepreneur                     | Difference between social class position in the labor market and in entrepreneurship                        | Change in social class position within entrepreneurship after entry                       |
| <i>Main Operationalization</i>            | Parental occupation and income during childhood versus an entrepreneur's occupation and income during adulthood | Socioeconomic conditions, such as occupational status and income in labor market versus in entrepreneurship | Change in type of entrepreneurship, profitability, growth, income, and wealth after entry |
| <i>Related Social Mobility Literature</i> | Intergenerational mobility (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Chetty et al., 2014)   | Entrepreneurship as mobility process (Sørensen and Sharkey, 2014)   | Mobility within organizations (Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019)                                 |

In contrast, the disruption of social hierarchies is central to the meritocracy ideal in modern societies, where individuals advance based on ability rather than social class origin (Amis et al., 2020). Recent organizational research has explored the unique insights and skills that emerge when individuals transition between classes—particularly for those from lower social classes who become upwardly mobile (e.g., Belmi et al., 2024; Dittmann et al., 2020; Martin and Côté, 2019).

Below, we analyze each type of mobility in detail, examine the role of social class origin in shaping overarching mobility patterns (social reproduction and social disruption), and discuss critical issues for future research. We illustrate our framework for the role of social class origins in entrepreneurs' mobility in Fig. 2.

### 7.1.1. Entrepreneurs' intergenerational social mobility

Intergenerational mobility research examines how opportunities for individual advancement are distributed across generations. It often addresses whether societies live up to meritocratic ideals by tracking the persistence or change in social class positions from parents to children (Chetty et al., 2017). Conventional intergenerational mobility studies use parental status at a single time point as a baseline and assess its correlation with children's outcomes later in life using indicators such as occupation, income, or education (e.g., Chetty et al., 2020; Laurison and Friedman, 2016). Intergenerational mobility is indicated by movement across these dimensions, while immobility implies stability across generations (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Hout, 1988).

Most articles in our review conceptualize intergenerational mobility through the occupational transmission of entrepreneurship, where children follow in their parents' entrepreneurial footsteps and inherit their occupational status (e.g., Duncan, 1965; Dunn and Holtz-Eakin, 2000; Sørensen, 2007) (see Table 6). Role modeling and specific human capital transmission are the dominant mechanisms driving this pattern (e.g., Colombier and Masclet, 2008; Lindquist et al., 2015). However, these studies largely focus on occupational inheritance without assessing the relative status of those occupations (see Aldrich and Kim, 2007, for an exception). Unlike many professions with defined status hierarchies (Sørensen and Grusky, 2019), entrepreneurship and its different forms encompass a wide range of social class positions. Thus, further distinctions between the types of entrepreneurship, such as incorporated vs. unincorporated ventures or necessity vs. opportunity entrepreneurship, would offer more nuanced insight into intergenerational mobility patterns—a theme we further discuss in the future research section.

Social reproduction remains the dominant outcome in this stream, echoing Bourdieu's view of class trajectories as durable and long-range upward mobility difficult to attain (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedman, 2014).<sup>29</sup> Still, several studies provide evidence of social disruption—such as when entrepreneurship occurs independently of parental occupation or income (Aldrich et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2006) or when educational advancement (Tao et al., 2021) and mobility aspirations lead individuals to reject parental paths (Mungai and Velamuri, 2011).

Only a few articles compare other forms of social class positions rather than occupations between generations, such as contrasting income distribution between parents and their entrepreneurial children (Lindquist and Vladasel, 2025), or consider broader sources of social class origin beyond parents, such as schoolmates (Markussen and Røed, 2017) or neighbors during childhood (Fairchild, 2010). As Bourdieu notes, occupational mobility may alter an individual's social and economic capital while leaving their cultural capital largely intact (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). This points to opportunities to explore intergenerational social mobility across all capital forms. Moreover, with a heavy focus on economic mobility, the more psychological and emotional components of mobility are often backgrounded. As a result, questions about class identities and their disruption or coherence across time are perhaps unintentionally omitted (e.g., cleft habitus, "hidden injuries," or the subjective negotiation of upward mobility; Bourdieu, 1984; Reay et al., 2009; Sennett and Cobb, 1977). A few studies explore these themes, for instance, by linking mobility experiences to perceived levels of

<sup>29</sup> Bourdieu's conception of social mobility is thought to be somewhat undertheorized by some. However, he did offer an overview of mobility, which includes shifts in the volume of capital and composition of capital over time. In addition to highlighting the individual process of mobility, in which he emphasized the idea of "a habitus clivé" or the psychological divide experienced with mobility, he also explicated how mobility could happen at a collective scale (Friedman, 2014)

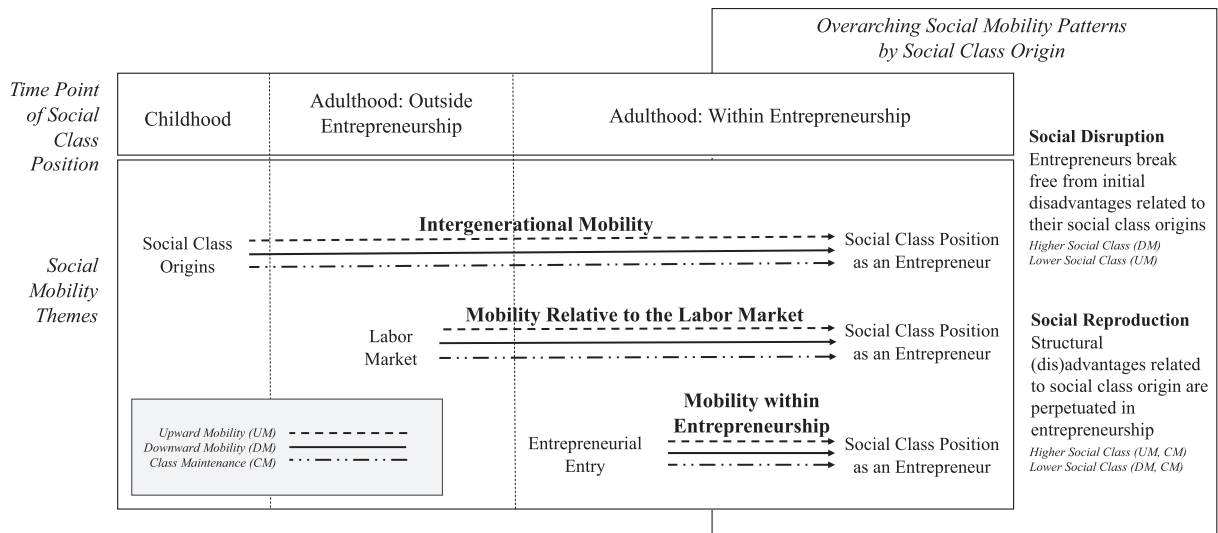


Fig. 2. Entrepreneurs’ social class origin and social mobility.

**Table 6**  
Entrepreneurs’ social class origins and intergenerational social mobility.

| Role of Social Class Origin | Main Argument   | Exemplary Articles  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Social Reproduction         | Intergenerational transmission of occupation, intergenerational stability of income.  | Sørensen, 2007; Aldrich and Kim, 2007; Mishkin, 2021; Lindquist et al., 2015; Colombier and Masclat, 2008 |
| Social Disruption           | Social class origin does not influence occupation or income of the next generation, individuals chose different occupation. | Aldrich et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2006; Mafico et al., 2024; Mungai and Velamuri, 2011                    |

Note: 25 of the 52 articles on intergenerational social mobility include mechanisms of entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer, 24 articles on entrepreneurial habitus formation, and three articles on access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations. Articles can simultaneously address multiple mechanisms. 11 articles explicitly and 41 articles implicitly discuss social mobility.

entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023) or comparing entrepreneurs’ intergenerational mobility experiences across countries (Mafico et al., 2024). These approaches highlight that “upward mobility may remain a state that not everyone unequivocally aspires to” (Friedman, 2014, pg. 264), which requires further attention when considering intergenerational social mobility via entrepreneurship.

7.1.2. Entrepreneurs’ social mobility relative to the labor market

A significant body of entrepreneurship research investigates social mobility in relation to the labor market (Rider et al., 2023; Sørensen and Sharkey, 2014). When individuals face friction or blocked mobility in traditional employment, entrepreneurship may serve as a vehicle for economic advancement (Kacperczyk, 2012; Rider et al., 2019). This stream often focuses on marginalized groups—such as the formerly incarcerated (Hwang and Phillips, 2024), racially minoritized groups (Yang and Kacperczyk, 2024), and women (Yang et al., 2024)—and compares their economic positions in the labor market with subsequent positions in entrepreneurship. Upward or downward mobility occurs if individuals experience better or worse economic positions in entrepreneurship compared to the labor market, while immobility occurs when there are no changes in conditions between the labor market and entrepreneurship.

Our review shows that social class origin shapes both access to entrepreneurship and outcomes relative to the labor market (see Table 7). First, it affects the type of entrepreneurial entry. Individuals from lower social class origins are more likely to enter entrepreneurship out of necessity due to barriers in the labor market (e.g., Jayawarna et al., 2014b; Patuelli et al., 2020; Yiu, 2013; Yu et al., 2023), while those from higher social class origins are more likely to pursue opportunity-driven entry (Acemoglu, 2022; Halaby, 2003). Human capital transmission is a central mechanism differentiating these paths (Jayawarna et al., 2014a; Hayward et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2021). Second, social class origin influences economic advancements post-entrepreneurial entry. The same class-based (dis)advantages observed in the labor market tend to persist after transitioning into entrepreneurship (e.g., Berglann et al., 2011; Bird and Wennberg, 2016). For instance, women from higher-class origins may overcome gender-based wage gaps (due to “glass ceilings” and wage penalties in the labor market) and experience economic advancements in entrepreneurship more easily (Constantinidis et al., 2019; Fairlie, 2005; Jayawarna et al., 2014b).

Only a few studies support a social disruption perspective—where entrepreneurship enables individuals to overcome labor market disadvantages (e.g., Abada et al., 2014; Shepherd et al., 2020). This may occur through education or labor market experience, which provides entrepreneurs with capital that can later be converted into entrepreneurial opportunities. This aligns with sociological theory,

**Table 7**  
Entrepreneurs' social class origins and social mobility relative to the labor market.

| Role of Social Class Origin | Main Argument   | Exemplary Articles   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Social Reproduction</i>  | Dis(advantages) in the labor market (e.g., based on gender or race) persist in entrepreneurship due to social class origins.      | Bates, 1997; Fairlie, 2005; Jayawarna et al., 2014a, 2014b; Berglann et al., 2011; Constantinidis et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2021 |
| <i>Social Disruption</i>    | Individuals break free from dis(advantages) in the labor market in entrepreneurship despite or due to their social class origins. | Abada et al., 2014; Shepherd et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 1997   |

Note: 15 of the 26 articles on entrepreneurs' social mobility relative to the labor market include mechanisms of entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer, 17 articles on entrepreneurial habitus, and nine articles on access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations. Articles can simultaneously address multiple mechanisms. 17 articles explicitly and 9 articles implicitly discuss social mobility.

which suggests that new cultural capital gained through formal and informal education is particularly important for those from lower-class backgrounds to move upward and disrupt social class stratification (DiMaggio, 1982).

Still, the dominant theme is the social reproduction of disadvantages for those from lower social class origins in entrepreneurship. Thus, the prevailing narrative of entrepreneurship as a meritocratic equalizer is challenged by findings showing that class-based advantages and biases, like those rooted in race, gender, or sexual orientation, persist across traditional labor market and entrepreneurial contexts (Yang and Kacperczyk, 2024). Moreover, there is a strong need to investigate the role of social class origin in conjunction with other sources of (dis)advantage in transitions from wage employment to entrepreneurship (Belmi et al., 2024; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019). For example, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) found that higher-class men received more callbacks for job interviews than women of any class background—suggesting that class advantage can be canceled out or amplified depending on gender. As we highlight in the discussion section, attending to how social class origin intersects with other social positions is essential for capturing complex mobility experiences and developing a complete theory of entrepreneurial mobility (Holvino, 2010).

### 7.1.3. Entrepreneurs' social mobility within entrepreneurship

Mobility research within and between organizations has played a central role in identifying how workplace structures perpetuate or mitigate inequality (Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019; Amis et al., 2020), although much of this work has focused on traditional employment (Kish-Gephart et al., 2023). These studies typically examine entry into prestigious occupations (Rivera, 2012) and upward movement within organizations—e.g., promotions, salary increases, or wealth accumulation (Pitesa and Pillutla, 2019). In parallel, a growing body of entrepreneurship research explores mobility within entrepreneurship, where upward mobility is defined by venture growth, increased profitability, or higher personal income after entry.

Our review finds that social class origin significantly influences the potential for upward mobility within the entrepreneurial process (see Table 8). Specifically, a key pattern in the literature is that initial capital advantages based on social class origins contribute to greater economic advancements in entrepreneurship, resulting in social reproduction. Many studies show that entrepreneurs from higher-class origins report higher profitability (Anderson and Miller, 2003; Honig, 1998), more robust growth (Elston et al., 2016; Lerner et al., 1997), and greater survival rates (Cooper et al., 1994). These outcomes are often linked to the nature of entry—such as founding incorporated businesses (Levine and Rubinstein, 2017), hiring employees (Robb and Fairlie, 2009), or engaging in opportunity-driven entrepreneurship (Berglann et al., 2011).

In contrast, only a few articles support the social disruption perspective, suggesting that entrepreneurs from lower-class origins can achieve upward mobility through unique strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, or innovative problem-solving, developed in the face of adversity (Cheng et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2022). Broader social class literature supports this idea: individuals from lower social classes may cultivate high self-efficacy, collaborative skills, or effective leadership styles—traits that are valuable in entrepreneurship (Dittmann et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2016; Martin and Harrison, 2022). However, these attributes may remain underutilized or undervalued due to persistent biases from gatekeepers, investors, or stakeholders (Belmi et al., 2024; Martin and Harrison, 2022). In the *Future Research* section, we elaborate on a strengths-based perspective of social class.

Meanwhile, downward mobility within entrepreneurship—for example, due to business failure, unemployment, or debt—remains

**Table 8**  
Entrepreneurs' social class origins and social mobility within entrepreneurship.

| Role of Social Class Origin | Main Argument   | Exemplary Articles   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Social Reproduction</i>  | Initial capital (dis)advantages based on social class origins lead to entry into opportunity (necessity)-oriented types of entrepreneurship and subsequent advancements.  | Honig, 1998; Valdez, 2016; Arregle et al., 2015; Blumberg and Pfann, 2016; Vladasel et al., 2021 |
| <i>Social Disruption</i>    | The type of entry into entrepreneurship (necessity vs. opportunity) and advancement within entrepreneurship is independent of social class origins or particularly favorable for those from lower social class origins. | Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017; Andric et al., 2024; Randolph et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022            |

Note: 35 of the 63 articles on entrepreneurs' social mobility relative to the labor market include mechanisms of entrepreneurial finance and skills transfer, 29 articles on entrepreneurial habitus, and 20 articles on access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations. Articles can simultaneously address multiple mechanisms. 11 articles explicitly and 52 articles implicitly discuss social mobility.

underexplored, even though existing evidence suggests it disproportionately affect entrepreneurs from lower social class origins (Åstebro and Bernhardt, 2003; Berglann et al., 2011; Lindquist and Vladasel, 2025; Tervo, 2006; Vladasel et al., 2021). Recent calls for a more dynamic, non-linear approach to social mobility are especially relevant here (Phillips et al., 2020). Future research could benefit from more process-oriented and experiential perspectives, including how entrepreneurs navigate mobility over time, and how they understand and internalize the experience of moving up, down, or across class lines.

Finally, mobility within entrepreneurship should be examined through multiple dimensions and forms of capital—economic, social, and cultural—and through both objective and subjective experiences. Conceptualizing mobility not only as an outcome (e.g., revenue, growth) but also as a lived experience may offer new insights into how entrepreneurs manage their identities, aspirations, and relationships within evolving class contexts.

## 8. Future research agenda

To this point, we have highlighted critical issues related to what constitutes entrepreneurs' social class origin, as well as its impact on entrepreneurial outcomes and social mobility. Based on these insights, we propose a future research agenda around three key areas: understanding the construct of social class origin, investigating its role in entrepreneurial networks and evaluations, and advancing research on social mobility. Each area offers important opportunities to deepen theory, address gaps in current knowledge, and inform more inclusive approaches to entrepreneurship research and practice.

### 8.1. Understanding social class origin

#### 8.1.1. The potential of explicit social class origin research

Despite the growing interest in social class origin, relatively few studies engage with the concept in an explicit and theoretically cohesive manner. Future research would benefit from adopting consistent terminology and drawing more directly on social class theory. While definitions may differ across disciplines, researchers can use the terminologies and conceptual boundaries outlined in this review to develop work that explicitly engages with social class origin. Consistent use of terms related to objective indicators, subjective impressions, forms of capital, sources, and timing will help build a more integrated body of work and link entrepreneurship research to broader organizational conversations on social class (Côté, 2024).

Incorporating class-specific theories offers further potential to enrich understanding of the class-related mechanisms and contexts that influence entrepreneurship for individuals from various social class origins. For example, social-cognitive theory explains how cognitive patterns emerge in response to social class environments, shaping individuals' psychological functioning and behavior (Kraus et al., 2012). This is especially relevant given that many challenges faced by individuals from a lower social class origin—such as resource constraints and uncertainty—also characterize entrepreneurial settings. A compelling research direction would be to explore whether individuals from lower social class origins are better equipped to cope with environmental adversity and demonstrate resilience and persistence or whether their external orientation, shaped by interdependence, constrains entrepreneurial agency (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023) and whether these effects vary by entrepreneurship type.

Sociocultural theory likewise explains how individuals' social class shapes their understanding of self in relation to others and the broader social context, leading to the development of different psychological orientations and behaviors (Stephens et al., 2012). Those raised in lower social class contexts may develop interdependent models of self, which encourage prosocial behaviors and occupational choices (Fang and Tilcsik, 2022). These orientations may predispose individuals from lower social class origins toward social entrepreneurship or lead to ventures with greater social impact through greater empathic accuracy (Kraus et al., 2010). Future research could examine how such dispositions align or clash with dominant norms in different entrepreneurial settings.

Sociocultural theory also emphasizes that social class has an impact across levels: individual propensities, interpersonal interactions, organizational policies and procedures, and societal beliefs are all impacted by social class origin (Stephens et al., 2025). Future work could look at questions across these different levels, for example, by examining whether an entrepreneurial habitus consistent with a lower or higher social class origin better aligns with societal norms expected of entrepreneurs. Understanding which entrepreneurship-related institutions (e.g., governmental agencies or crowdsourcing platforms) are more friendly to entrepreneurs based on social class origin—and the types of interventions needed to help entrepreneurs from all social class backgrounds to be successful—would further contribute to understanding these dynamics.

Finally, Bourdieu's foundational perspective on social class remains essential for understanding how social class is reproduced through the interplay of societal structures and social constructions (Bourdieu, 1984). This approach can be particularly useful for understanding whether individuals adapt their habitus as they move up or down the social hierarchy (Campbell and Kish-Gephart, 2024) and how the cultural toolkit acquired by traveling through social classes (Martin and Côté, 2019) influences their entrepreneurial practices. For instance, do socially mobile entrepreneurs deploy different cultural toolkits when interacting with venture capitalists from elite backgrounds versus when collaborating with team members from a similar lower-class origin? How do these individuals use their cultural toolkit in responding to downward mobility (e.g., long-term job loss or failed investments)?

#### 8.1.2. Exploring the multidimensional nature of social class origin

A second area for development involves deepening understanding of the multidimensionality of social class origin. Scholars should theorize the unique additive or interactive effects of Bourdieusian capital forms (i.e., economic, social, cultural capital), their underlying objective indicators (i.e., education, income, and occupation), and subjective impressions of entrepreneurs' social class origin. Clarifying how these elements operate in combination will generate more nuanced insights. For example, implicit research that uses

parental occupation to indicate social class has often overlooked additional objective indicators, such as income (cf. Rider et al., 2023). Moreover, studies on intergenerational transmission of entrepreneurship have often failed to consider distinctions between types of entrepreneurship (e.g., incorporated vs. unincorporated), though some exceptions (e.g., Vladasel et al., 2021) point the way toward a more holistic approach.

The subjective dimension of social class origin deserves greater attention. Entrepreneurs may misjudge (Morin and Motel, 2012) or understate (Friedman et al., 2021) their actual class position, yet subjective social class perceptions often more strongly predict psychological and behavioral outcomes than objective measures (Adler et al., 2000; Oesch and Vigna, 2023). This is particularly relevant in highly social settings such as pitch events and entrepreneurial networking (Côté, 2024), where people rapidly assess one another's social class based on minimal cues, such as sixty-second interactions, brief speech recordings, or online photos (Becker et al., 2017; Kraus and Keltner, 2009). Drawing on social comparison theory, future studies could explore how perceived class discrepancies shape entrepreneurial confidence, behavior and legitimacy-seeking strategies, particularly in contexts where entrepreneurs compare themselves to others in the ecosystem (e.g., see Bakker and McMullen, 2023 for interactions between majority and minority groups). It could also be beneficial to jointly study objective and subjective dimensions of social class origin and to explore how they interact. For example, does subjective social class origin explain variance in entrepreneurial persistence, performance, or well-being beyond that accounted for by objective indicators?

Equally important is the distinction between social class origin and current social class. While most of the reviewed research focuses on the former, current social class may also influence entrepreneurial actions and outcomes (e.g., Audretsch et al., 2013; Ge et al., 2022) or moderate the effects of social class origin (Côté, 2024; Zhang, 2013). Exploring both perspectives in tandem can illuminate how advantages and disadvantages accumulate, persist, or shift over time.

### 8.1.3. Integrating intersectionality

Social class is intertwined with other intersecting identities, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1991). To fully understand how social class origin impacts the entrepreneurial process, it is essential to adopt an intersectional lens to fully capture how social class origin interacts with these other social identities. Although some reviewed studies address gender, ethnicity, and immigration status alongside social class origin (e.g., Abada et al., 2014; Constantinidis et al., 2019), there remains substantial room to examine how power, privilege, and inequality operate across intersecting identities. Research informed by inclusive entrepreneurship (Bakker and McMullen, 2023) and transitional entrepreneurship (Pidduck and Clark, 2021) could illuminate how social class intersects with other visible and invisible characteristics (such as disability status, neurodivergence, sexual orientation, immigrant status, ethnicity, and religion), and whether these intersections produce additive, multiplicative, or context-dependent effects (cf. Belmi et al., 2024). In particular, future studies could explore how intersectional identities shape access to capital, entry motivations, social evaluations, and long-term mobility trajectories in entrepreneurship.

## 8.2. Investigating access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations

Among the three integrative mechanisms identified in this review, access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations remains the most under-researched. This is surprising given the prominence of research on access to external financing and third-party evaluations in studies of gender (Jennings and Brush, 2013) and ethnicity (Bengtsson and Hsu, 2015). A key insight from adjacent fields is that individuals make rapid judgments about others' social class based on minimal cues, and these judgments influence perceptions of competence, ambition, and legitimacy (Becker et al., 2017; Kraus and Keltner, 2009). These snap judgments often draw on class-based stereotypes, which associate higher-class backgrounds with intelligence and work ethic and lower-class backgrounds with warmth or sociability (Durante et al., 2017).

Given the importance of third-party evaluation in entrepreneurial resource mobilization, future research should investigate how social class origin influences critical evaluations and shapes access to funding, partnerships, mentorship, and legitimacy (Clough et al., 2019). Prior work on homophily in venture financing (e.g., Claes and Vissa, 2020) suggests that shared social class origin between entrepreneurs and investors could shape investment decisions and interpersonal rapport. Specifically, it is important to understand how a lack of transferred capital and the imprints of cognition and behavior translate into external social evaluations and subsequent access to resources. Moreover, if resource holders disproportionately come from higher social class origins, class-based biases may be structurally embedded in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Understanding how these dynamics play out in evaluative settings could illuminate subtle yet consequential forms of inequality.

Researchers might also explore how entrepreneurs strategically frame their class backgrounds to gain support. For example, some may lean into narratives of adversity, grit, or resilience to build legitimacy, while others may downplay their origins to avoid triggering bias. Insights from cultural entrepreneurship (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001) and narrative signaling (Fisher et al., 2021) provide useful tools for analyzing how founders use identity stories to influence stakeholders. Future work could also examine whether entrepreneurs from lower-class origins frame mobility experiences as sources of unique strengths, emphasizing the many positive traits and skills they bring to the entrepreneurial process and how such framing is received by different audiences (Pidduck and Clark, 2021; Yu et al., 2022).

In addition, we see strong potential in research that links social class origin to opportunity recognition. Despite its centrality in entrepreneurship theory (Corbett, 2007; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), little is known about how social class origin shapes the recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities, e.g., who recognizes which opportunities and when and how they discover those opportunities. Given that both social (Ozgen and Baron, 2007) and human capital (Corbett, 2007) are crucial for opportunity recognition, class-based differences in exposure and access may help explain disparities in entrepreneurial aspirations and success.

### 8.3. Advancing social mobility research

A key implication of our framework is the need to investigate entrepreneurship not just as a discrete event but as a process that unfolds within and potentially transforms individuals' social class positions over time. First, we call for more explicit and systematic conceptualization and measurement of social mobility in entrepreneurship. This includes comparing entrepreneurs' class origins to their destinations using indicators such as income, wealth, and occupational prestige (Rider et al., 2023). While existing scales of occupational status have proven relatively stable across time and context (Song and Xie, 2023), applying them to entrepreneurship remains challenging due to the diversity of entrepreneurial forms—from solo self-employment to founding large high-tech ventures (Bögenhold, 2019)—and the different social standings associated with entrepreneurial activities across societies and time. Another approach to conceptualizing social mobility is using objective measures of average educational requirements and earnings associated with specific occupations (Duncan, 1961). However, entrepreneurship often lacks formal educational requirements and exhibits high variance in earnings (Hamilton, 2000; Shane, 2009), again challenging straightforward classification. These limitations highlight the need for a more nuanced, multidimensional understanding of social mobility in entrepreneurship.

Second, future research should adopt a more dynamic perspective on social mobility, one that traces how different forms of capital change—e.g., shifts in the specific forms of capital across a continuum or how one form of capital can be converted into others—across the entrepreneurial lifecycle. For example, entrepreneurs may lose economic capital through venture failure but gain cultural or social capital that can be redeployed in future ventures or labor market transitions. These nonlinear or gradational shifts may have implications not only for material outcomes but also for eudaimonic well-being, which is often an important motivator for pursuing entrepreneurship (Phillips et al., 2020).

Third, we encourage research that identifies the pathways through which entrepreneurs from lower social class origins achieve upward mobility and the boundary conditions that make such trajectories possible. For instance, what enables unincorporated or necessity-driven entrepreneurs to transition into opportunity-driven or growth-oriented ventures over time (e.g., Kimmitt et al., 2020)? Much of the literature emphasizes the deficits (strengths) tied to coming from a lower (higher) social class origin (Morris and Tucker, 2023), mainly explaining mobility patterns that reproduce social privilege. However, a strengths-based perspective could foreground the adaptive capabilities and unique insights developed in lower-class contexts (Belmi et al., 2024; Martin and Côté, 2019) and identify the achievements and potential of entrepreneurs from lower social class origins (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017; Yu et al., 2022). For example, how does an interdependent model of self—commonly found in lower-class contexts (Stephens et al., 2012)—help entrepreneurs support one another and face challenges? Does this influence how they build or use social network ties? What implications does social class origin have for founding teams, especially given that teams with higher proportions of members from lower-class origins have been shown to outperform those with lower proportions (Dittmann et al., 2020)?

Finally, researchers should explore how mobility experiences—whether upward, downward, or lateral—shape entrepreneurs' self-concept, identity, and decision-making. For instance, are first-generation college students more inclined to become entrepreneurs because they view entrepreneurship as a means of autonomy and control (Belmi et al., 2024)? Alternatively, are upwardly mobile individuals particularly sensitive to the risks of business failure to protect newly gained capital? When and why might someone leave a high-status, resource-abundant occupation to pursue a venture that entails downward mobility (Rider et al., 2023)? While there has been extensive discussion on the consequences of entrepreneurial failure, the experience of downward mobility and its effects on entrepreneurs remains understudied. These experiences warrant deeper examination, particularly in light of the psychological and emotional dimensions of mobility that are often overlooked in entrepreneurship research.

### 8.4. Practical implications

Beyond scholarly contributions, our review has important implications for practice. First, it highlights the experiences of entrepreneurs from diverse social class backgrounds, raising awareness of social class origin as a distinct and often overlooked source of inequality in entrepreneurship. By highlighting the class-based mechanisms influencing entrepreneurial outcomes, this work encourages policymakers and educators to recognize social class as a crucial dimension of diversity that intersects—but is not reducible to—gender, race, or migration background (cf. Henry et al., 2024).

Several targeted interventions follow from our framework. To address financial and skill-based disparities, programs could improve early access to capital for entrepreneurs from lower-class origins by developing tailored funding models, offering capital through equity-free grants or fellowships, and facilitating face-to-face interactions with resource holders. Accelerator and entrepreneurship education programs should also provide access to both general and specific forms of human capital through tailored training modules and mentorship opportunities that align with diverse social class origins. For example, studies in higher education show that reframing challenges can improve outcomes for students of a lower social class origin (Dittmann et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2019). Similar strategies could be applied in entrepreneurial training programs to foster engagement, self-efficacy, and persistence among founders from lower social class backgrounds.

To support entrepreneurial habitus formation, practitioners can expose aspiring founders to mentors, advisors, and funders from diverse social class backgrounds equipped with unique perspectives and approaches to entrepreneurship. Reflective exercises that help founders recognize how their class backgrounds shape their values, norms, and decision-making styles may help entrepreneurs recognize their strengths and understand when new tools or skills might be necessary for success. This activity could also boost self-efficacy as participants reflect on how their class backgrounds have served as sources of strength in the past.

With respect to access to entrepreneurial networks and evaluations, institutions should create more intentional opportunities for founders from lower social class origins to connect with investors, funders, and industry experts. Class-sensitivity training for pitch

judges, funders, and program facilitators can also help mitigate unconscious bias. Across these interventions, practitioners should recognize that individuals from lower social class origins often bring unique skills, insights, and social orientations that constitute entrepreneurial strengths.

Finally, our findings challenge institutions to reflect on how they frame entrepreneurship. Narratives that valorize traits like boldness, independence, or hustle may unwittingly privilege higher-class norms. By questioning these default assumptions and revising program language, expectations, and design, institutions can contribute to building a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem—one in which upward social mobility is accessible to all, regardless of social class origin.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Leif Brändle:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Anna-Lena Rönnert:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Kristie J.N. Moergen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Eric Yanfei Zhao:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our editor, Phillip Kim, for his excellent guidance, and to the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive and developmental feedback throughout the review process. We also thank the participants of the “Social Class and Entrepreneurship” workshop at AOM 2024 and the EGOS 2023 sub-theme on “Intergenerational Entrepreneurial Projects” for their insightful comments, which helped us to further develop the paper. We are especially thankful to Peter Belmi, Phil DeOrtentis, Andrea Dittmann, Vivek Soundararajan, Jessi Streib, Mike Lerman, Jörn Block, and Andreas Kuckertz for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript. Leif Brändle gratefully acknowledges the support of the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2025.106503>.

### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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