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How the Middle Class Exists (in Academic Literature): A Semantic Analysis

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How the Middle Class Exists (in Academic Literature): A Semantic Analysis

by
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Professor Uvin —

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Table of Contents

Abstract

As there is no definition for the term "middle class" in development studies literature, academics create ad hoc and/or arbitrary definitions. Authors may define the middle class themselves according to the purpose of their analysis, clarify that no singular definition exists, and assert that a singular definition need not matter. Other authors may not define the middle class at all, leaving readers to infer its conceptualization. This thesis proposes that, despite ad hoc, arbitrary, and implied definitions for the middle class, academics across disciplines conceptualize the middle class using three approaches with transdisciplinary application: the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations approaches. To showcase these approaches, this thesis analyzes semantics of works about the middle classes of Sub-Saharan Africa, Papua New Guinea, and Ghana. In sum, there may be agreement yet.

Introduction

Any article about the middle class of a developing country, analyzed in isolation, cannot convey what little consensus exists. Authors' methodological and semantic choices pepper any academic article, starting with the very *definition* of the "middle class." Scholars choose relative, absolute, or mixed terms to define the middle class, specify its range, and present its indicators. The middle class's in-between placement on a class spectrum—what sociologist Göran Therborn calls its "alleged centrality"—may seem intuitive.[1] "Centrality" implies that there are three class categories—the poor, the middle class, and the rich—but "alleged" renders that centrality contestable, as no precise upper and lower thresholds exist.

Without a precise definition of the middle class, scholars propose ad hoc definitions. Poverty researchers Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo clarify that "[t]he choice of…income groups is (obviously) ad hoc."[2] The Brookings Institution's Homi Kharas begins a section of a paper with, "[i]n defining the middle class, the purpose of this paper must be kept in mind."[3] Ad hoc methodological and semantic choices have become normalized, making definitional ambiguity not only acceptable, but predictable and defensible. Authors may define the middle class themselves according to the purpose of their analysis, clarify that no singular definition for the middle class exists, and assert that a singular definition need not matter.

Economists often use relative, absolute, and/or mixed income-based approaches to define the middle class. The relativist approach often locates the middle class in the middle-income deciles of a national income or consumption distribution, thereby specifying a percentile range—

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[1] Göran Therborn, "Class in the 21st Century," *New Left Review* 78 (November/December 2012): 15.
[2] Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, "What Is Middle Class about the Middle Classes around the World?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 4.
[3] Homi Kharas, *The Emerging Middle Class in Developing Countries*, working paper no. 285, 10, http://www.truevaluemetrics.org/DBpdfs/Economics/OECD/OECD-Emerging-Middle-Class.pdf.

for example, between the 20th and 80th percentile of the national distribution—for the middle class.[4] Absolute approaches may propose intervals expressed in purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars, like locating the middle class at the lower threshold of $10 daily income per capita in 2005 PPP and the upper threshold of $20, $50 or $100.[5] Mixed approaches may combine absolute thresholds with relative thresholds, like setting the lower boundary in PPP dollars and the upper boundary at a percentile of an income distribution.[6] Income has become a "key criterion" for defining the middle class, making income-based thresholds common in economics.[7]

Even authors who propose income-based thresholds assign "recognizable markers" to the middle class. Henrike Donner, an anthropologist, lists practices that "may be seen as recognizable markers of a shared global middle-class culture": celebrating global holidays, visiting private health clinics, and eating out.[8] After specifying that the middle class spends $11-110 per day in a 2018 blog post, Kharas and Kristofer Hamel write,

> [t]he [$11-110 per day] threshold we use in this work has the following characteristics: those in the middle class have some discretionary income that can be used to buy consumer durables like motorcycles, refrigerators, or washing machines. They can afford to go to the movies or indulge in other forms of entertainment. They may take vacations. And they are reasonably confident that they and their family can weather an economic shock—like illness or a spell of unemployment—without falling back into extreme poverty.[9]

[4] Rachel Spronk, "Exploring the Middle Classes in Nairobi: From Modes of Production to Modes of Sophistication," *African Studies Review*57, no. 1 (April 2014): 94; Kharas, *The Emerging*, 11; Banerjee and Duflo, "What Is Middle," 5; Frank-Borge Wietzke, "New Middle Classes Reshape the Developing World," *Current History*, January 2019, 17.

[5] Matthieu Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?': Scratching beneath the Surface of the Middle Class(es) In Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Turkey and Vietnam," *World Development* 158 (2022): 4; Luis F. Lopez-Calva, Jamele Rigolini, and Florencia Torche, *Is There Such a Thing As Middle Class Values?*, working paper no. 286, 6, January 2012, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6719082.pdf; Wietzke, "New Middle," 17; Luis F. Lopez-Calva and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class*, working paper no. 5902 (n.p.: The World Bank, 2011), 13; Nancy Birdsall, *Does the Rise of the Middle Class Lock in Good Government in the Developing World?* (n.p.: Center for Global Development, 2015), n.p.; Kharas, *The Emerging*, 12.

[6] Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 4.

[7] Lena Kroeker, David O'Kane, and Tabea Scharrer, eds., *Middle Classes in Africa: Changing Lives and Conceptual Challenges*, Frontiers of Globalization (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 3, PDF.

[8] Henrike Donner, "The Anthropology of the Middle Class across the Globe," *Anthropology of This Century*, no. 18 (January 2017): n.p.

[9] Homi Kharas and Kristofer Hamel, "A Global Tipping Point: Half the World Is Now Middle Class or Wealthier," *Future Development* (blog), entry posted September 27, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/09/27/a-global-tipping-point-half-the-world-is-now-middle-class-or-wealthier/.

Consider how Donner (an anthropologist) and Kharas and Hamel (development economists) recognize similar "characteristics": the middle class can celebrate holidays and "take vacations," can visit private health clinics and "weather…illness," and can eat out and "go to the movies."[10] And yet, despite these aligned observations by economists and anthropologists, there is little consensus about whether middle-class characteristics (qualities inherent to the middle class) exist.

To demonstrate this lack of consensus, consider the debate about middle-class characteristics within development economics. Andy Sumner argues that what may *seem* like middle-class characteristics are correlates of higher incomes, not features of a discrete and identifiable class.[11] In other words, evidence of some characteristic or "everyday practice" (like eating out or visiting private health clinics) is not sufficient to identify the middle class.[12] By contrast, Luis F. Lopez-Calva and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez find that a low probability of experiencing poverty is *the* defining characteristic of the middle class, while Banerjee and Duflo consider holding a steady, waged job to be defining.[13] Whereas Banerjee and Duflo and Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez emphasize how one characteristic defines the middle class, Sumner cannot claim that any characteristic is singularly defining. Indicators of the middle class may be shared across (think Sumner and Donner) and disputed within disciplines, which invites an analysis of potential transdisciplinary continuity between definitions.

Regardless of the discipline, (the notion of) arbitrariness is significant for understanding how the middle class is defined. The word "arbitrary" means "coming about seemingly at random"

[10] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.; Kharas and Hamel, "A Global," *Future Development* (blog).
[11] Andy Sumner, *The Buoyant Billions: How "Middle Class" Are the New Middle Classes in Developing Countries? (And Why Does It Matter?)*, working paper no. 309, 7, October 2012, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154878/1426628_file_Sumner_Buoyant_Billions_FINAL.pdf.
[12] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p
[13] Banerjee and Duflo, "What Is Middle," 21-22.; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*.

or "determined by individual preference."[14] When an author explains, justifies, or defends their definition as serving the purpose of their analysis, the arbitrary definition can be understood as "determined by individual preference." When an author does *not* explain, justify, or defend their definition (it is implied), the arbitrary definition can be understood as "coming about seemingly at random." A seemingly random definition may still serve an author's analysis, however, so arbitrary definitions can be assumed to be purpose-driven and defensible.

Arbitrary definitions reflect an author's choices, making analyzing definitions' semantics an interesting exercise. Consider Kharas' explicit and implied choices (italicized) in his definition of the middle class:

> *Taking an absolute approach, I [Kharas] define* the middle class as those households with daily expenditures between USD10 and USD100 per person in purchasing power parity terms. The lower bound *is chosen* with reference to the average poverty line in *Portugal and Italy*, the two advanced European countries with the strictest definition of poverty. The poverty line *for a family of four* in these countries is USD14533…The upper bound *is chosen* as *twice the median income* of *Luxembourg*, the richest advanced country. *Defined in this way*, the global middle class excludes those who are considered poor in the poorest advanced countries and those who are considered rich in the richest advanced country.[16]

The purpose of Kharas's analysis determines the italicized choices. Preceding this excerpt is a paper section in which Kharas explores alternative definitions for the middle class before defending his choice to (a) define the middle class in terms of consumption levels and (b) use an "absolute approach with a common threshold range for all countries."[17] *Within* his defense, however, some choices are *not* made explicit and therefore seem arbitrary for their randomness, despite being purpose-driven. For example, why does he specify a "family of four" or "twice the median income"? Why choose Luxembourg, a miniscule baking paradise with an artificially inflated gross domestic product, and not economic powerhouse Germany or the European Union

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[14] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arbitrary
[16] Kharas, *The Emerging*, 12.
[17] Ibid; 10, 11-12.

average? Even Kharas, who emphasizes that definitions are purpose-driven, does not fully explain the choices inherent to his definition of the middle class.

Some authors (Kharas included) opt not to explain (all of) their choices. Donner mentions "a global middle class, or the global middle classes" in the first sentence of her article "The Anthropology of the Middle Class across the Globe."[18] She suggests that there are multiple middle classes, but does not clarify how many there are, or what they are. Moreover, comments like Banerjee and Duflo's comment that "it seems reasonable to think of this group as a middle class, especially since it seems hard to imagine calling them rich" feel subjective, though they reinforce that it is intuitive to position the middle class below, and as compared to, the rich.[19] Sumner provides too many unclear choices when he calls the middle class the "'emerging middle,'" the "'non-polar,'" the "'in-between' group," and the "'buoyant billion'"—all in one sentence.[20]

Such semantic choices may go undetected but have implications for whom is even considered middle class. Income-based definitions are especially prone to under or overinclusion—a critique that non-economists will levy.[21] Therborn, a sociologist, writes,

> Martin Ravallion of the World Bank places the middle class of the developing countries in a belt between $2 and $13 a day, [which] would include almost two-thirds of Chinese…Nancy Birdsall, looking to the middle class as a liberal political agent, sets the [middle class] bar higher, at $10 a day…[but by] that measure rural China has no middle class.[22]

One choice—here, a $2-13 or >$10 threshold—determines whether two thirds of China's population is considered middle class. Evidently, thresholds can be consequential.

All this said, academics seem to accept that definitions are arbitrary. Kharas writes,

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[18] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[19] Banerjee and Duflo, "What Is Middle," 6.
[20] Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 1.
[21] Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer, *Middle Classes*, 5-6.
[22] Therborn, "Class in the 21st," 15-16.

[i]t is therefore less interesting to place too much emphasis on a precise definition of the middle-class range. The focus should be on changes over time of the number of individuals falling into a *specific category*, even if that has an element of *arbitrariness* about its boundaries [emphasis added].[23]

Accepting, and even advocating for, arbitrariness and specificity seems paradoxical, but Kharas argues that delineating class-based "categories" *at all* is more important than determining a class's "boundar[y]." Kharas claims that while any definition of the middle class will be "rather arbitrary," such "[i]nevitable" arbitrariness will *not* affect observed trends.[24] And anthropologist Rachel Spronk writes, "[t]he impreciseness of the [middle-class category] is not a hinderance per se but can be used productively."[25] In other words, despite nuanced definitions that may under- or overinclude persons, academics understand—albeit conceptually—where and how the middle class exists.

This conceptual understanding is especially strong in anthropology. According to Donner, some anthropologists dispute the topic of class altogether, yet *still* conduct ethnographic studies about middle-class lifestyles. Such ethnographies, while not about "class per se," produce a general understanding of how the middle class lives. Donner writes, "it seems appropriate to find some common denominators in the analysis," meaning anthropologists can derive trends from the ethnographies, despite contested notions of class.[26] Contested notions of class, like contested definitions of the middle class, still allow shared conceptualizations among academics.

I have established that authors can recognize others' purpose-driven definitions; craft their own purpose-driven definitions; and claim that multiple definitions, despite their differences, can reflect the understood "alleged centrality" of the middle class.[27] Given the middle class's arbitrary

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[23] Kharas, *The Emerging*, 13.
[24] Ibid, 12.
[25] Spronk in Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer, *Middle Classes*, 319-320.
[26] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[27] Therborn, "Class in the 21st," 15.

boundaries and identifiers, and given academics' willingness to accept those arbitrary boundaries and identifiers (if only to assert their own purpose-driven definitions), proposing my own definition of the middle class would be unproductive. I will instead consider how the middle class is often conceptualized using alternative dimensions with transdisciplinary application. I will heed Spronk, who writes,

> disciplines have each defined and measured the middle class in a manner that is most suitable for their main area of inquiry. This need not to be problematic, as long as one is aware of one's own disciplinary limitations and is willing to engage in dialogue to find where interdisciplinarity works in complementary ways;

and I will heed Clément et al., who write, "if the overly general 'middle class' category falls flat in developing countries, the question that arises is whether alternative conceptualizations that more accurately fit common characteristics of class formation should be mobilized."[28] Ultimately, I argue that academics conceptualize the middle class using some combination of three dimensions—vulnerability, capability, and aspiration—that distinguish "the middle" from those above and below, thereby capturing understood conceptualizations of developing countries' middle classes.

The following pages explain trends in defining the middle class in developing countries across disciplines (primarily development economics and anthropology) using three dimensions: vulnerability, capability, and aspirations. I will refer to vulnerability, capability, and aspirations "approaches" and "dimensions" interchangeably. Given the limited sampling of analyzed articles, this thesis can only suggest what themes *may* exist across disciplines. Another limitation is worth mentioning: I first read about the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations approaches in works about the middle class, and supplemented those works with readings by the dominant theorists mentioned. I cannot claim to understand how extensively vulnerability, capability, and aspirations

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[28] Spronk in Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer, *Middle Classes*, 317; Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 13.

has been studied in different disciplines, nor can I summarize dominant theorists' contributions that do not study (middle) class dynamics in developing countries. This thesis contains one chapter addressing the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations approaches; one chapter analyzing academic literature; and a conclusion.

Chapter I: The Vulnerability, Capability, and Aspirations Approaches

At a high level, *vulnerability* is the risk of descending into poverty; *aspiration* is the desire to realize an idealized end, state, or life of value; and *capability* is the opportunity to realize an end, state, or life of value. In exploring the middle class's vulnerability, capability, and/or aspirations, academics explore the *meaning* of being middle class—an extension of or supplement to "inadequate" income-based definitions.[29] In other words, as income-based thresholds are arbitrary, the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions can capture the lived meanings of being middle class. When economists Burger et al. claim that their capability approach for defining the middle class "better captures the pathways for the social and political benefits associated with the 'middle class' as conventionally understood," they imply that there *is* a "conventional" understanding.[30] The vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions—dimensions that already permeate the literature—can illuminate those "pathways." This thesis describes how academics use the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions to understand the middle class when arbitrary definitions seem prevalent.

The Vulnerability Approach

As vulnerability to poverty is useful for demarcating class, a vulnerability approach for defining the middle class has become somewhat "typical."[31] Given its microeconomic impetus, a vulnerability approach often analyzes individuals' or households' likeliness of descending below the poverty line—another potentially arbitrary threshold—and into poverty. Having proposed the

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[29] Ronelle Burger, Camren McAravey, and Servaas van der Berg, *The Capability Threshold: Re-examining the Definition of the Middle Class in an Unequal Developing Country*, working paper no. 9523, 1, November 2015, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/125044/1/dp9523.pdf.
[30] Ibid, 14.
[31] Ibid, 1.

vulnerability approach in their paper "A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class," Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Jaurez write, "the middle class is defined [by] the level of income that allows individuals to protect themselves from falling into poverty over time."[32] While vulnerability may be described as "high" or "low," "increasing" or "decreasing," or in terms of "degrees" or "levels," such vague descriptors indicate a subject's proximity to income-based thresholds.[33]

Insecurity and vulnerability are related and may be used synonymously. Lacking vulnerability can increase an individual's security, imbuing "economic insecurity" and "economic vulnerability" with similar meaning.[34] Exposure to negative "shocks"—another frequent word— may decrease one's security and increase one's vulnerability. Shocks (like sudden unemployment, a family death or illness, a failed crop, or a natural disaster) may catalyze descents into poverty. Nancy Birdsall summarizes the relationship between vulnerability, (in)security, and shocks, explaining that "[t]he distinction is between insecure strugglers…who are vulnerable to household-specific shocks…and the more secure…group [the middle class] who are reasonably insured against such shocks."[35] Wolfgang Fengler et al. reinforce this distinction, claiming to "look at vulnerability in terms of the risk of being pushed back into poverty and the risk of having expectations of entry into the middle class dashed."[36] The phrases "back into poverty" and "entry into the middle class" imply that vulnerable households exist below the middle class, but above the poverty line. A vulnerable household, proponents of the vulnerability approach argue, is *not* a middle-class household—a "statistically significant" distinction.[37] Methodologically, the

[32] Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*, 6.
[33] Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 13; Fengler, Kharas, and Caballero, "The Forgotten," *Future Development* (blog); Lopez-Calva, Rigolini, and Torche, *Is There*, 1; Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 10.
[34] Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 6.
[35] Birdsall, *Does the Rise*, n.p.
[36] Fengler, Kharas, and Caballero, "The Forgotten," *Future Development* (blog).
[37] Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*, 14.

vulnerability approach claims to avoid the error of overinclusion: misidentifying vulnerable and poor households as middle class.[38]

The vulnerability approach to middle class analysis is credited to Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez. Prominent development economists Andy Sumner and Nancy Birdsall cite Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez. Burger et al. mention "a vulnerability approach" in their discussion paper, writing "[t]he middle class has typically been defined using income, occupation, self-identification, or a vulnerability approach."[39] Burger's quote is somewhat misleading, as Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez *do* express vulnerability in terms of income, but also establish that an absolute level of daily per capita income corresponds to a level of risk of falling into poverty (also called a "probability" or "percent risk"). Ultimately, a ten percent *probability* of descent determines the income threshold that demarcates the lower threshold for the middle class. Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez summarize their findings and methodology, explaining,

> [w]e set the lower threshold of the middle class at an absolute level: a 10 percent probability of falling into poverty. Using a regression-based approach we exploit panel data to determine the amount of comparable income associated with that probability level—using income as the relative measure of vulnerability to poverty. Based on our findings from applying this methodology to [Chile, Mexico, and Peru], we set an absolute lower bound for the middle class at 10 dollars PPP.[40]

Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez conclude that a low probability of experiencing poverty is *the* defining characteristic of the middle class.

The vulnerability approach has transdisciplinary application. Consider the following quote from political scientist Joan M. Nelson: "[People who are] vulnerable to sliding into poverty…may continue to worry about vulnerability even when objective risks diminish."[41] Development

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[38] Ibid, 3.
[39] Sumner, *The Buoyant*; Birdsall, *Does the Rise*; Burger, McAravey, and van der Berg, *The Capability*, 1.
[40] Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*, 14.
[41] Nelson (2003) in Anirudh Krishna, "Why Don't 'the Poor' Make Common Cause? The Importance of Subgroups," *Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 6 (July 2009): 957.

economists use the vulnerability approach to study "objective risks," but other academics may use a modified vulnerability approach to study the meaning of, and manifestations of, "worry." Outside of development economics, however, few authors (of the works read for this thesis) apply an explicit "vulnerability approach." Many *imply* that individuals feel vulnerable—at risk of descending "below" one's current state—using signal words. An excerpt from Donner's article "The Anthropology of the Middle Class across the Globe" contains these signal words (italicized), despite never using a derivation of the word "vulnerability":

> *[T]he true cost of education* for those from less affluent backgrounds…*is often only discovered in hindsight* … The disillusion and *insecurity* of outcome such investment [in their quest for middle-class status] may entail is, however, a pervasive theme of ethnography … *[P]recarity*, based on under- and unemployment, *insecurity* due to debt, lack of access to property and finally failed lifecycle expectations *weigh heavily* on middle-class minds and politics.[42]

Words like "true cost," "insecurity," and "precarity" signal vulnerability, and conditions like unemployment, debt, and lack of access to property often accompany descents. Learning the "true cost of education…in hindsight" seems like a quasi- and fear-inspiring shock. The cost of education may "weigh heavily on middle-class minds" for its potential to catalyze descents. Elsewhere in her article, Donner signals the middle class's vulnerability in writing about the cost of education and graduate unemployment; maintaining "problematic," pressure-inducing, and morally ambiguous lifestyles; competition with neighbors within gated communities; worrisome relations with connections "below" the middle class—especially family and servants; and media-driven "moral panics" ("publicly represented shared anxieties").[43] Given these implied vulnerabilities, a vulnerability approach is relevant to ethnographic studies about the middle class.

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[42] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[43] Ibid.

The Capability Approach

There are precedents that income-based definitions of the middle class are inferior to capability-based definitions. In "The Capability Threshold: Re-examining the Definition of the Middle Class in an Unequal Developing Country," economists Burger et al. argue that income-based definitions seem "inadequate" for "captur[ing] political and social meanings of being middle class."[44] As opposed to an income threshold, they use a "capability threshold" to define the middle class.[45] To surpass the capability threshold, an individual must possess four capabilities: (1) freedom from concern about survival and meeting basic needs; (2) financial discretion and buying power; (3) labor market access; and (4) access, and the ability to process, information.[46] Lacking any of these capabilities disqualifies a subject from being middle-class, as they would have failed to surpass the capability threshold.[47] Burger et al. set a precedent for "operationaliz[ing]" the capability approach to supplement "inadequate" income-based definitions.

The capability approach, pioneered by Nobel Prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, explores individuals' opportunities to achieve an end, state, or life of value. According to Sen, enhancing individuals' capabilities should be development's objective. Sen posits that resources can be means to achieve valued outcomes *if* one possesses the capability to use those resources. Access to a resource cannot predict achievement realization or ensure well-being. For Sen, resources are commodities. Caroline Sarojini Hart, a fellow at the Human Development and Capability Association, summarizes Sen's capability approach, writing,

> [i]t is as important to examine an individual's capability set, the range of freedoms, or *capabilities,* to live in ways they have reason to value, as it is to examine the actual ways in which people are living. Sen uses the term *functioning(s)* to denote the way(s) people

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[44] Burger, McAravey, and van der Berg, *The Capability*, 1, 2.
[45] Ibid, 2.
[46] Ibid, 4.
[47] Ibid, 6.

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are actually living … So, in Sen's capability approach, commodities may be converted into capabilities (*well-being freedom*) and then into functionings (*well-being achievement*).[48]

In sum, resources are means to develop capabilities and achieve functionings; capabilities are real freedoms—essentially, opportunities—to achieve functionings; and functionings are the realized achievements.

To achieve functionings, conversion occurs twice: once when an individual converts commodities into capabilities, and again when an individual converts capabilities into functionings. Capability development and functioning achievement depend on "helping" and "hindering" "conversion factors"—the "degree in which a person can transform a resource into a functioning," according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.[49] Conversion factors are personal, sociopolitical, and environmental conditions (circumstances) that can "help" or "hinder" an individual's commodity—capability—functioning sequence. Due to conversion factors, individuals with identical resources may not develop the same capabilities to realize a valued way of living. This thesis will employ Sen's capability approach, with modifications.

To enrich Sen's capability approach, some academics draw on concepts from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu Bourdieu proposed that, in addition to economic *forms of capital* (commodities and resources), social, symbolic, and cultural capital exist. Social capital refers to an individual's social network(s), symbolic capital refers to an individual's reputation and authority, and cultural capital refers to an individual's knowledge and experience.

To incorporate Bourdieu's forms of capital into Sen's capability approach, Hart developed a model called the *Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework.* Hart treats Bourdieu's forms of capital as

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[48] Caroline Sarojini Hart, "Education, Inequality and Social Justice: A Critical Analysis Applying the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework," *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no. 5 (2019): 584.

[49] Hart, "Education, Inequality," 588; "The Capability Approach," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.p., last modified December 10, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/.

inputs in the commodity—capability—functioning process of Sen's capability approach.[50] She calls these inputs "capital commodities." Just as access to resources cannot ensure achievement realization, neither can a "portfolio" of forms of capital.[51] In Hart's analytical framework, social, cultural, symbolic, *and* economic capital (commodities and resources, in Sen's approach) can be converted to functionings. In this thesis, I will consider how middle-class individuals convert economic and non-economic forms of capital, per the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework.

Bourdieu also proposed that an individual can acquire *or* inherit capital—a distinction important for this thesis, as my analyzed works contain middle-class subjects who inherited capital from their families.[52] According to Hart, Bourdieu noted that capital-to-capital convertibility matters.[53] Capital-to-capital conversions often occur as "inter-generational transfers" between adults and children to bolster the child's competitive advantage.[54] Hart proposes a two-part "activation" process for inherited capital: children must convert inherited (family) capital to individual capital—a capital-to-capital conversion—before converting individual capital to capabilities, in accordance with Sen's capability approach.[55]

As for another instance where academics enrich Sen's capability approach with Bourdieu's concepts, Dr. Meera Tiwari applies Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *doxa* to Sen's capability approach to understand the *opportunity structure* of India's middle class. Habitus is one's embodied dispositions, internalized from the values and traditions of one's micro social environment (home or school). Doxa is a larger social context (a society) perceived as predictable, self-evident, and unquestioned. An opportunity structure consists of informal and formal

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[50] Hart, "Education, Inequality," 589.
[51] Ibid, 588.
[52] Bourdieu (2010): 74 in Hart, "Education, Inequality," 585.
[53] Hart, "Education, Inequality," 588.
[54] Ibid; 589, 586.
[55] Ibid, 590.

institutions that create "rules" for individual behavior. An opportunity structure can be understood and navigated—a challenge for those with either weak opportunity structures or weak capacity to navigate those structures. On the relationship between habitus, doxa, and opportunity structures, Tiwari writes, "the collective habitus of [India's 'new middle class'] influences and creates the doxa," which in turn "shapes [and] powers a strong and predictable opportunity structure."[56] As the opportunity structure concept relates to Sen's capability approach, it seems that one cannot exercise opportunity freedom without a functioning and navigable opportunity structure.

The middle class's habitus, doxa, and opportunity structure may influence its aspirations. Tiwari reinforces this idea, writing, "achieved aspirations…strengthen the opportunity structure by providing pathways to achievement [that] would support aspirations of other [middle-class] individuals."[57] Aspirations, like functionings, can be achieved through a commodity—capability—aspirations conversion process. Tiwari's idea that achievements "strengthen" opportunity structures does not include another detail: strong opportunity structures can become *insular* and *exclusive*—in other words, particular to, and enabling for, middle-class individuals at the expense of lower-class individuals. This argument, while somewhat beyond the scope of this thesis for its relevance to class formation (not conceptualization), merges the capability and aspirations approaches and provides a preview of the latter. Donner writes,

> [a] kind of language has been adopted by a variety of institutions engaged in producing middle-class persons … [that] may be applied…to all citizens alike, [but] the opportunities can on the whole only, or at least more fully, be realized by middle-class persons.[58]

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[56] Meera Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities and Aspirations of the Middle Classes in India," in *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, ed. Flavio Comim, Shailaja Fennell, and P. B. Anand (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 423, PDF.
[57] Ibid, 425.
[58] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.

If the "institutions engaged in producing middle-class persons" only create opportunities for the middle class, these "institutions" would constitute the middle class's opportunity structure. Donner implies that those *seeking* middle-class status may be excluded from the middle class's opportunity structure. Reinforcing this idea, Tiwari finds that India's middle class not only has "asymmetric reach" to opportunity-providing institutions related to public goods, media, and social policy, but also "undermines the existence" of those with a greater degree of vulnerability.[59] On how asymmetric opportunity structures relate to the capability approach, Tiwari writes,

> [t]ensions can be understood within the notions of *means* and *ends* within the capability approach. While the 'ends' of achieving the … aspirations [of India's 'new middle class'] are located very much within the development discourse, some of the 'means' by which [India's 'new middle class'] are achieving these are problematic. The process often restricts the aspirations and the freedoms of marginalised communities.[60]

As exclusivity refers to a *deliberate* decision to limit access or membership to a select group of people, I will attempt to understand whether the middle classes discussed in my analyzed works deliberately "undermine" the poor with "problematic" means.

The potential insularity and exclusivity of the middle class's opportunity structure is also reinforced in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's work on the *capacity to aspire*. "Capacity" may seem synonymous with "capability," but the former refers to an amount or level of resources that one can utilize, and the latter refers to one's ability to utilize those resources. Appadurai considers the capacity to aspire a "navigational capacity" required to "navigat[e] the complex steps between [cultural] norms and specific wants and wishes [aspirations]."[61] The capacity to aspire is a "resource" accessible to "the relatively rich and powerful," the "wealthier," and "the better off."[62]

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[59] Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 412, 430, 431.
[60] Ibid, 431.
[61] Arjun Appadurai, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition," in *Culture and Public Action*, ed. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Stanford University Press, 2004), 69, PDF.
[62] Ibid, 68.

While Appadurai does not mention "opportunity structures" specifically, he suggests that the middle class's opportunity structures may become insular and exclusive in explaining how "wealthier people" develop a capacity to aspire. Appadurai writes,

> [t]he better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the *relation* between a wide range of *ends and means*, … they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of <u>aspirations</u> and *outcomes*, … [and they have] many opportunities to *link material goods* and *material opportunities* to more general and generic possibilities and *outcomes* … This *resource* [the capacity to aspire] unequally tilted in favor of wealthier people in any society, is also subject to the truism that 'the rich get richer,' since the archive of concrete <u>experiments with the good life</u> gives nuance and texture to <u>more general norms and axioms</u> [emphasis added].[63]

The italicized words invoke Sen's capability approach, which focuses on how resources, as means, may be converted to real ("material") opportunities to achieve outcomes ("ends"); and the underlined words invoke Tiwari's argument about how achieved aspirations ("experiments with the good life") fortify opportunity structures created by the middle class's collective habitus and doxa ("more general norms and axioms"). Like habitus and doxa, an axiom is self-evident and universally accepted. In the passage, Appadurai argues that "the better off," equipped with a developed capacity to aspire, can convert that capacity to opportunities to realize aspirations. The "truism that 'the rich get richer'" reinforces Tiwari's observation that "achieved aspirations…support [the] aspirations of other [middle-class] individuals" and Donner's observation that "opportunities can on the whole only…be realized by middle-class persons."[64] Essentially, the middle class, as relatively "wealthier" than the poor, may become more insular and exclusive as its opportunity structure becomes more insular and exclusive. The middle class's insular, exclusive "terrain" would be a "capability of capabilities terrain: the opportunity to create more opportunities."[65] Since Appadurai defines "poverty" as "[w]here the opportunities…in

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[63] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 68-69.
[64] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 69; Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 425; Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[65] Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 427.

regard to the future are limited," understanding opportunities using a capability approach may also help to define the middle class.[66]

Analyzing academic literature for signals of the capability approach, including "depictions" of middle-class individuals' opportunity structures, habitus, and doxa, will supplement income-based conceptualizations of the middle class. I will not only discern the middle class's (implied) opportunity structures, but also attempt to identify capital commodity— capabilities—functionings processes in practice. Upon reading about a subject's access to a capital commodity, I will infer how the subject may have converted that capital commodity, if at all. This analytical application of the capability approach should supplement income-based definitions of the middle class.

The Aspirations Approach

The aspirations approach explores subjects' desires to realize an idealized end, state, or life of value. Development studies often examines aspirations among the poor at the microeconomic level, frequently finding that low aspirations—an "aspirational deficit"—may reinforce poverty.[67] Tiwari elaborates on the word "aspiration," noting "its usage to describe 'steadfast longing for a higher goal'; 'earnest desire for something above one' or 'a strong desire for realization.'"[68] Aspirations can be held and pursued. An aspiring subject can be an individual with an "individual aspiration" or a collective with a "shared" or "common" aspiration."[69] According to Appadurai, despite pertaining to individual subjects, "[a]spirations are never simply individual (as the

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[66] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 69.
[67] Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 427.
[68] Ibid, 413.
[69] Garance Genicot and Debraj Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, working paper no. 19976, March 2014, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w19976/w19976.pdf; Krishna, "Why Don't," 952; Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 11; Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 414.

language of wants and choices inclines us to think) [but] are always formed in interaction and the thick of social life."[70] Since economists study individuals' market choices, Appadurai remarks on their disciplinary "monopoly" (my words, not his) over aspirations literature. He encourages literature on aspirations and culture.[71] However, as this thesis will demonstrate, aspirations approaches can be transdisciplinary.

The word "aspiration" is often described with reference to what is being desired, with varying degrees of specificity and materiality. Examples include "economic," "socio-economic," "social," "political," and "career" aspirations.[72] These aspirations can interact with and mutually reinforce one another. Dr. Hew Wai Weng addresses aspirations' intersectionality in "examin[ing] how the intersection of middle-class and religious aspirations leads to the popularity of Muslim gated communities in contemporary peri-urban Jakarta."[73] Authors may also specify what a subject aspires towards, with varying degrees of specificity and materiality. For example, Clément et al. find that the middle classes of four developing countries possess an unspecific "aspiration for 'better.'" Clément et al. then clarify what an "aspiration for 'better'" means in each country: the aspiration for better security from violence in Brazil and Côte d'Ivoire and the aspiration for a better balance between traditional and modern lifestyles in Turkey and Vietnam.[74] Like the "aspiration for 'better'" notion, that of "the good life" also appears.[75] Like Clément et al., Appadurai explains that a Buddhist, a Muslim, a "poor Tamil peasant woman," a "cosmopolitan woman from Delhi," and a "poor woman from Tanzania" would pursue "the good life"

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[70] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67.
[71] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67.
[72] Wietzke, "New Middle," 20; Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 3; Spronk, "Exploring the Middle," 108.
[73] Wai Weng Hew, "'Islamic Ways of Modern Living,'" in *Jakarta: Claiming Spaces and Rights in the City*, ed. Jorgen Hellman, Marie Thynell, and Roanne van Voorst (London: Routledge, 2018), 198, PDF.
[74] Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 3.
[75] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67; Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.

differently.[76] Development economists and anthropologists use like discourse to write about aspirations, suggesting that aspiration has transdisciplinary application. That said, for an individual, "for 'better'" is a relative concept, and "the good life" is an absolute end state. Is that distinction significant? In my literature analyses I will consider such semantics about aspirations.

As a demonstration of the semantic usage of "aspiration," consider Tiwari's claim that a subject generally aspires for something "that would bring satisfaction beyond the essentials and routines of survival."[77] If middle-class individuals are unlikely to descend into poverty (according to Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez), they need not fixate on acquiring means of survival.[78] As opposed to "survival," a middle-class individual may fixate on status maintenance—a different type of survival that necessitates its own "essentials" and "routines." The young middle-class professionals in Spronk's study aspire to climb Nairobi's social ladder but must invest in a "cultural style" to realize that aspiration. Spronk writes, "the young professionals' lifestyles are not merely an expression of desires but can be understood as realizing and maintaining subjective realities."[79] For Nairobi's young professionals, even holding aspirations requires "maintaining" a lifestyle. Donner summarizes an ethnographic study from Papua New Guinea, in which the authors find that middle-class personhood "requires careful consideration, skills, and day-to-day management as well as long-term planning."[80] "[D]ay-to-day management" is a "routine of survival" (to use Tiwari's words). "[L]ong-term planning" may be less about planning to achieve a higher aspiration, and more about planning to maintain a status quo for the long term.

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[76] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67.
[77] Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 415-416.
[78] Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*; Kharas and Hamel, "A Global," *Future Development* (blog); Birdsall, *Does the Rise*.
[79] Spronk, "Exploring the Middle," 111.
[80] Gewertz and Errington (1999) in Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.

Maintaining a lifestyle to realize aspirations for mobility is a paradox that I will call "maintaining for mobility."

In addition to the concepts already introduced in this section, I will rely on a theory of "socially determined aspirations" proposed by economists Garance Genicot and Debraj Ray. In their paper modeling aspirations-formation functions, Genicot and Ray define aspirations as socially- and personally-determined income or wealth thresholds which act as "reference points" for individuals. The income/wealth threshold to which an individual aspires is determined by an individualized aspirations-formation function involving social *and* personal determinants. In an aspirations-formation function, F is "the society-wide distribution of lifetime incomes in the current generation."[81] If an individual recognizes a society-wide income distribution, their aspirations function becomes socially determined. Genicot and Ray find that perceptions of F can also be cognitively "truncated": an individual would not perceive the society-wide income distribution but would instead perceive the income distribution *among economically similar individuals* within their social environment.[82] Aspirations inspired by economically similar individuals are no less socially determined, but they are also cognitively bound.

Genicot and Ray's use of "social" seems to mean the negative of "personal" or "individual." For Genicot and Ray, "social determinants" are derived from *perceptions* of those within one's social environment, not *interactions* with those within one's social environment. By contrast, Appadurai considers aspirations formation dependent on "interaction and the thick of social life."[83] Despite reducing "social" to social perceptions, Genicot and Ray's assigning dual importance to social and personal factors is notable, as other economic models typically adopt

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[81] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 5.
[82] Ibid, 6.
[83] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67.

either a social or personal approach. The aspirations-formation theories proposed by Genicot and Ray (economists) and Appadurai (an anthropologist) are not incompatible, however, as both consider aspirations as socially determined.

Genicot and Ray delineate "global" and "local" social determinants of aspirations: the society-wide income distribution is a "global" social determinant, and one's cognitively bound aspirations window is a "local" social determinant.[84] The idea that perceptions of income distributions can be cognitively "truncated"—essentially, localized—is compatible with Appadurai's thinking that "aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely *local* ideas [emphasis added]."[85] In the works I analyze, distinctions between the middle class's global and local orientations feel reminiscent of Genicot and Ray's argument about global and local determinants of aspirations.

Some academics find that the middle class has globally or locally oriented subgroups. Sociologist Hagen Koo proposes that the term "global middle class" refers to the "globally oriented, globally connected, and globally mobile" members of countries' (upper) middle classes. These subgroups' social environment (to use Genicot and Ray's language) is global.[86] However, Donner cites Leela Fernandes's research about India, which finds that a *locally oriented*, yet affluent, middle class "with different aspirations" has emerged. This middle class seems "deeply embedded locally," which suggests that global cultures may not be as compelling as research suggests.[87] Genicot and Ray's idea that aspirations have global (society-wide) *or* local (cognitively

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[84] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 1.
[85] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 6; Appadurai, "The Capacity," 68.
[86] Hagen Koo, "The Global Middle Class: How Is It Made, What Does It Represent?," *Globalizations* 13, no. 4 (2016): 449.
[87] Fernandes (2006) in Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.

bound) social determinants is similar to the idea that middle-class persons can have global or local orientations.

That said, global and local orientations are not mutually exclusive. Genicot and Ray clarify that "individuals are *always* cognizant of *some* incomes higher than theirs whenever such incomes exist" and deem their "local income neighborhood model" too restrictive.[88] Koo notes that the global middle class is *more* globally oriented than other subgroups of the middle class—not exclusively globally oriented.[89] In analyzing semantics regarding aspirations, one can appreciate not only the degree to which middle-class persons may be globally or locally oriented, but how authors understand global and local orientations as determinants of aspirations formation.

The concept of "upward" and "downward" orientations is also important to the aspirations approach. Genicot and Ray maintain economist James S. Duesenberry's argument that aspirations formation involves looking "upward" at the rich.[90] And yet, middle-class persons may also look "downward." Consider a hypothetical in which two urban persons are similar in income, except the former is a recent rural-to-urban migrant who compares himself to those in rural areas, whereas the latter is urban-born and compares himself to those living more luxuriously in the city. To invoke Genicot and Ray's definition of aspirations as income or wealth thresholds which act as "reference points" for individuals, I'll add that reference *groups* can also inform aspirations. In the hypothetical, the similar individuals' reference groups, and hence aspirations, may differ.

Interactions with lower-class individuals can influence aspirations. Middle-class lifestyles that "invite serious criticism" from older, less-affluent generations can produce "moral

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[88] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 6.
[89] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 20; Koo, "The Global," 442.
[90] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 20; Duesenberry (1949) in Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 6.

dilemmas."[91] At the same time, middle-class persons may consider the poor's practices

"problematic."[92] On the topic of (class) homogeneity in middle-class home, Donner writes,

> [d]ependence on the working class for services brings the latter's non-desirable traits into the home, and management of servants' presence is a constant concern for middle-class families … [especially in] South Asia … On the one hand a marker of high status, domestic workers (including cleaners, nannies, drivers and care workers) challenge the assumed homogeneity of the family home, in particular where childcare, so central to the reproduction of class, is involved…[because] fears about loss of control and emotional bonding may be experienced.[93]

Genicot and Ray and Duesenberry seem correct—aspirations formation involves looking

"upward"—but a "downward" orientation may cause *frustrated* aspirations.

On frustration, Genicot and Ray find that crossing an aspirational threshold can occur if

the gap between one's current standard of living and aspirational threshold is not so large as to

induce frustration. In other words, a too-large aspiration gap induces frustration.[94] Consider the

following excerpt:

> [S]ocietal conditions induce overly demanding aspirational reference points on some segments of that society. What fails is not the aspiration, but the ability to live up to it … This discussion suggests caution in the empirical implementation of [aspirations] theory, urging researchers to properly distinguish between the absence of aspirations, and the frustration induced by bars that are set too high.[95]

Genicot and Ray's cautionary discussion has merit, as the middle-class subjects of Donner's

excerpt on (class) homogeneity in the home *have frustrated—not absent—aspirations.*

Distinguishing between seemingly absent aspirations and induced frustrations is an important

consideration, as I will apply aspirations theory in my literature analyses, with special attention to

middle-class individuals' global, local, upward, and downward orientations. I will utilize a

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[91] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.; Spronk, "Exploring the Middle."
[92] Leichty (2003) in Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[93] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[94] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 1; Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 415.
[95] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 12.

modified, cross-disciplinary aspirations approach that attempts to understand what, or whom, middle-class individuals refer to—"reference points" or reference groups located globally, locally, "above," or "below"—in forming aspirations.

Chapter II: Literature Analyses

The words "vulnerability," "capability," and "aspiration" (including their derivatives) are often made explicit in literature about the middle class in developing countries. Consider the following titles: "Aspirations and Inequality"; "A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class"; and *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach.*[96] Titles may also apply a specific dimension to empirical research, like "Insurgent Aspirations? Weak Middle-Class Utopias in Maputo, Mozambique"; or multiple dimensions, like "Capability of Capabilities and Aspirations of the Middle Classes in India."[97] Wietzke titles a subsection of an article "Aspiration and Instability," and Clément et al. title subsections "'No longer poor, but still vulnerable': The middle is polarized" and "What does the middle aspire to?"[98] Spronk does not make her emphasis on aspiration obvious in the title and subtitles of her article on Kenya, but she concludes with, "[a] consideration of class as an aspirational category and the ways in which it is practiced allows us to see [what is] central to understanding middle-class formation."[99]

The three approaches are also intersectional and may require semantic disentangling. In "A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class," Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez argue that "vulnerability to poverty is the absolute functioning that defines the middle class," but acknowledge that functionings are the "partner concept" of capabilities.[100] Genicot and Ray conclude "Aspirations and Inequality" concludes with the suggestion to develop a multidimensional model of aspirations that would "tie [their] ideas in with the notion of

[96] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*; *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, ed. Flavio Comim, Shailaja Fennell, and P. B. Anand (Cambridge University Press, 2018), PDF.
[97] Morten Nielsen and Paul Jenkins, "Insurgent Aspirations? Weak Middle-Class Utopias in Maputo, Mozambique," *Critical African Studies*, 2020, PDF; Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities."
[98] Wietzke, "New Middle," 21; Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 9, 10.
[99] Spronk, "Exploring the Middle," 111.
[100] Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*, 2.; Burger, McAravey, and van der Berg, *The Capability*, 3.

capabilities developed by [Amartya] Sen."[101] Evidently, a work may address intersectional dimensions explicitly and implicitly.

Searching the words "vulnerability," "capability," and "aspiration" (and their derivatives) in a paper may not yield results. Consider the following excerpt from the conclusion of Sumner's article "The Buoyant Billions":

> [T]he conceptual basis of what it means to be a member of the 'in-between' group(s) warrants some greater probing, perhaps around the themes of *security* (i.e. what is the buffer between the poor and 'middle class' and what is meant by 'secure,' perhaps in terms of asset ownership of durable goods, health insurance coverage, or employment in formal or informal sectors); *connections* (what connections are needed to 'get on,' such as networks from university education, insider connections to navigate the state bureaucracy when needed) and *aspirations* (what is meant by aspiration; for example do the middle classes want 'better' things such as privately educated children [or] positional goods?) [emphasis added].[102]

Security may be attained when one's vulnerability to poverty falls, making "security" a (likely) signal for the vulnerability dimension. [103] Sumner argues that works may not address the middle class at all, if those labeled as "middle class" have not attained security (the lack of vulnerability) from poverty.[104] For Sumner, the vulnerability dimension exposes misleading definitions in works claiming to study the middle class, but that actually study vulnerable groups below, or in a subgroup of, the middle class. Returning to the excerpt, "connections" signals the capability dimension, as capability and networks are often related. Sumner's use of "aspirations" reinforces the notion of an "aspiration for 'better.'"[105] In one sentence, Sumner demonstrates how vulnerability, capability, and aspirations can function as a trifecta for understanding the middle class.

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[101] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 23.
[102] Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 12.
[103] Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 6; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, *A Vulnerability*.
[104] Sumner, *The Buoyant*, 11.
[105] Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 11.

The vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions may also be inferred in work from disciplines besides development economics. On how valuing education seems a "double-edged sword" for parents seeking middle-class status, Donner (an anthropologist) writes, "[t]he disillusion and insecurity of outcome such investment [in their quest for middle-class status] may entail is, however, a pervasive theme of ethnography."[106] Donner, like Sumner, implicitly addresses vulnerability, capability, and aspirations. The words "insecurity," "investment," and "disillusion" are *signals*—not synonyms for—vulnerability, capability, and aspiration: "insecurity" signals vulnerability, "investment" signals capability, and "disillusion" signals aspiration. Recognizing these dimensions' signals in three empirical works is the method employed in this thesis.

Everjoice J. Win on Sub-Saharan Africa

In "Not Very Poor, Powerless or Pregnant: The African Woman Forgotten by Development," Zimbabwean activist Everjoice J. Win describes how the development industry (of which she is a part, as an organizer) neglects issues that affect middle-class African women like herself. The development industry capitalizes upon a "favourite image" of its beneficiaries: a "poor, powerless, and invariably pregnant" woman.[107] Win argues that development organizations should address middle-class women's issues—issues that transcend class-based "resource poverty"—considers unequal power relations and gender-based rights violations as *the* women's issue.[108] She does not propose specific development projects, but instead argues that middle-class women need "spaces"

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[106] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.
[107] Everjoice J. Win, "Not Very Poor, Powerless or Pregnant: The African Woman Forgotten by Development," *IDS Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (2004): 61.
[108] Ibid, 64.

to articulate, and "space" to engage with, patriarchy issues.[109] Save one mention of "women's greater vulnerability to HIV," the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions are implied in Win's article.[110]

In the first section of her article, Win dismantles the development industry's arbitrary conceptualization of "an African woman." Win, who does not dissociate from the industry by using pronouns like "us," says development relies on a "stereotypical image" of a poor, "bare-footed" African woman "burdened with lots of children, or carrying one load or another on her back or her head."[111] Not unlike purpose-driven definitions of the middle class, this image's use has a purpose: to encourage financial support. And yet, Win claims that

> [a]ny researcher worth their salt has to go to the 'most remote' village to find [this African woman] for their statistics on issues like access to water, to be valid. Similarly, the gender programme officer in any institution has to always demonstrate that her work is about the very poor and marginalised woman, for her to be regarded as legitimate.[112]

Win highlights her predicament: middle-class African women are often ignored by development, as they cannot "valid[ate]" any statistic, yet middle-class African women *in the development industry* must promote the stereotypical image of the "poor and marginalised woman [to] be regarded as legitimate" in the industry itself.

Win's understanding of the middle class—what she affirmatively calls "my class"—is derived from experience, and she articulates key characteristics of middle-class African women. The middle-class woman commutes (literally and metaphorically) between her rural village and her urban area "with ease"; engages with stakeholders at the local, national, regional, and international levels; and cannot be called "very poor" or "very rich."[113] Win implies that middle-

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[109] Win, "Not Very," 61, 64.
[110] Ibid, 61.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 62.

class women cannot live lavishly, as they "shoulder the [monetary] burden [for those experiencing shocks] when governments and others fail."[114] Win alludes to topics relevant to this thesis: family relationships ("her rural village"), local and global orientations, the middle class's "alleged centrality" ("not very poor, nor…very rich"), and vulnerability-inducing shocks.

Most important to Win's conceptualization of the middle class, for the purpose of her article, is economic resources. She assigns few other defining characteristics to the middle class besides access to money, calling her peers "non-resource-poor women," "non-poor women," and "non-poor activists."[115] These non-poor women "do not need income-generating activities."[116] Win's experience in the development industry may inform this resource-based conceptualization, as she finds that the middle-class woman "is constantly reminded that development is about eradicating poverty and therefore it focuses on those defined as 'the poor' (read as resource-poor)."[117] Despite possessing a normative understanding of middle-class African women, Win implies that *income*—albeit an unspecified level of income—is a defining characteristic for the middle class. In her article imploring the development industry to adopt rights-based approaches that consider poverty as not only *resource* poverty, she uses a resource-based "definition" of the middle class.

To examine how vulnerability, capability, and aspirations apply to Win's article, consider the following excerpt:

> The big difference between development's favourite woman and me [Win] lies merely in the degree to which we each experience these problems. As they say, money does not buy happiness but it helps. Equally education, geographic location and access to resources do not buy gender equality – but they help. It is important to note, though, that I am constantly hovering on the brink of becoming the poor woman in the posters because of something like HIV/AIDS or violence. Many of us have been reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence

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[114] Win, "Not Very," 62.
[115] Ibid; 64, 63.
[116] Ibid, 64.
[117] Ibid, 63.

by the demands placed on us by those around us. Because we are still subjected to practices like property grabbing, there is the ever-present possibility of finding oneself as destitute as the mythical development target.[118]

Win's perceived vulnerability is easy to infer, as "brink" is synonymous with "threshold"—a common notion in the vulnerability approach, as vulnerability is about proximity to a poverty threshold. Win does not need to specify an income level for this poverty threshold, however, as the image of a "*mythical* development target [emphasis added]" is enough to influence her perception of her (in)security. She seems to associate the image with an abstract, yet understood, amount of resources. "HIV/AIDS," "violence," and "property grabbing" are shocks that could catalyze Win's descent into poverty ("becoming the poor woman"). She attributes her "hand-to-mouth existence" to "the demands placed on [middle-class women] by [relatives]." The expression "hand-to-mouth" reinforces middle-class women's proximity to the "brink" of poverty (the poverty threshold), as it connotes lacking a buffer, with no provision for future security. The excerpt challenges Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez's conclusion that a low probability of experiencing poverty is *the* defining characteristic of the middle class, as Win considers herself both vulnerable *and* middle-class.

Win's reflection on vulnerability also contributes to a trend that Donner observes. Donner finds that

> [w]here discussions of the 'new' middle classes started out with a focus on upwardly mobile communities…we have recently seen more work on failed mobility … Studies of failed expectations, of precarity and entanglement in future-speculation which may or may or may not pay off, exemplifies how being middle-class is on the one hand a subjective state, and on the other hand only ever a temporary promise.[119]

Win is reminded of the inferred "precarity" and "temporary promise" (Donner's words, not Win's) of her middle-class status by comparing herself to "the poor woman in the posters." By contrast,

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[118] Win, "Not Very," 62-63.
[119] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.

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the "[s]tudies" in Donner's analysis describe how middle-class subjects derive the "precarity" of their status from experiences of "failed [upward] mobility" (of failing to achieve aspirations for mobility). In applying Donner's analysis to Win's essay, the difference between "upward" and "downward" orientations among middle-class subjects becomes apparent.

Returning to the excerpt, Win's reinforcing how "resources" are means to secure "happiness" and "gender equality" signals the capability dimension. Win treats "money," "education," and "geographic location" as capital commodities. In saying "money *does not* buy happiness but it helps. Equally education, geographic location and access to resources *do not* buy gender equality – but they help [emphasis added]," Win implies that she has not achieved "happiness" or "gender equality"—both functionings—but possesses means for conversion. That said, to what extent "resources…help" is unknown. Win seems to possess the means to achieve happiness or gender equality (functionings) could she convert her resources to capabilities.

One can also infer the capability dimension (and, by extension, the aspirations dimension) elsewhere in Win's essay. When Win describes the development industry itself, she seems to describe an asymmetric opportunity structure, enabled by the industry's doxa, that benefits "Northern academic feminists."[120] She claims that Northern feminists have different "requirements" for legitimating their work, writing,

> [if a middle-class woman] works in development, she constantly has to demonstrate how she is connected to the women at grassroots level … This can even go to ridiculous lengths, for example women's rights NGOs [by African women] have been forced to take 'their grassroots poor' to a UN meeting or international conference, just to prove their legitimacy … [but] none of these requirements are put on Northern feminists or other rights organizations.[121]

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[120] Win, "Not Very," 63.
[121] Ibid.

The development industry's "doxa"—its predictable, self-evident, and unquestioned social context—reinforces norms about "legitima[te]" work for Northern and African feminists. These norms, as part of the doxa, create an insular opportunity structure that serves Northern feminists. African feminists' work about "practical [grassroots] experiences and suggestions"—the only "legitima[te]" work, according to the industry—is rarely supported by donors, discussed at conferences, used by policymakers, or quoted in international media. In turn, the industry accepts what Win calls "the often-heard refrain, 'Africa has no policy analysis capacity.'"[122] The industry's doxa creates an insular opportunity structure for Northern academics, thereby excluding African academics like Win.

Win, less able to navigate the development industry's opportunity structure than her Northern peers, has frustrated aspirations. Recall that, according to Genicot and Ray, a too-large aspirations gaps induce frustrations. Genicot and Ray caution that, "[w]hat fails is not the aspiration, but the ability to live up to it."[123] Albeit a subjective judgement, the tone of Win's essay may be deemed "frustrated." Consider how Win writes about her unrealized "ability to live up to" (Genicot and Ray's words, not Win's) her (implied) aspiration to "fully participate in change processes" (italicized):

> Because for many years the work of the African middle-class activist has had to focus on and be based in rural areas, she has one foot at the micro level and the other in macro spaces. This dual identity can only result in schizophrenia! *It becomes extremely difficult to hone one's skills and expertise.*[124]

> How are African feminists and activists expected to *strengthen or develop their intellectual capacities* when they are too busy running small projects, while others have all the space, the resources and the support they need?[125]

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[122] Win, "Not Very," 63.
[123] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 12.
[124] Win, "Not Very," 63.
[125] Ibid.

"[S]kills" and "expertise" signal the capability dimension. Win seems to treat "skills" and "expertise" as forms of embodied cultural capital that require activation to become capabilities. The industry's requirements for middle-class African feminists—"focus[ing]…on rural areas" to represent "the grassroots" at international events—may be considered a hindering conversion factor. "[H]one," "strengthen," and "develop," are capital-activation verbs; "intellectual capacities" are capital commodities that Win can access; being "too busy [with] small projects" is a hindering conversion factor for Win; and "space," "resources," and "support" are capital commodities that Northern feminists ("others") can access.

Tessa Pijnaker & Rachel Spronk on Ghana

In "*Africa's Legends*: Digital Technologies, Aesthetics, and Middle-Class Aspirations in Ghanian Games and Comics," anthropologists Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk study the ideation, production, and reception of an app developed by upper-middle-class Ghanian game developers. *Africa's Legends,* a 2012 superhero game inspired by African folklore and American comics, was lauded by global audiences, but was received less emphatically by continental (African) and national (Ghanian) audiences. Pijnaker and Spronk trace the game's ideation to the developers' "privileged" backgrounds as children of middle-class parents who could afford available technologies.[126] These developers' backgrounds informed their aspirations for *Africa's Legends*, which became a means to express their aspirations for Ghanaian society.

Pijnaker and Spronk signal the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations dimensions (though vulnerability has no obvious semantic signals in their article). First, they delve into the developers' family backgrounds, which engenders thinking about inherited capital, family-to-

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[126] Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk, "Africa's Legends: Digital Technologies, Aesthetics and Middle-Class Aspirations in Ghanaian Games and Comics," *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 3 (2017): 347, PDF.

individual capital conversions, and habitus—all topics of the capability approach. Next, they analyze the *Africa's Legends* production process. I argue that the developers converted capital commodities (Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator) to aspirational functionings (expressions of global citizenship in Ghanaian and African society). Finally, the authors explore the app's reception, as "less privileged" Ghanaians critiqued the app's "inauthentic" portrayal of African heritage, while global audiences and the developers' upper-middle-class peers celebrated its "Africanness."[127] The app's reception among global, local, and "below" audiences speaks to aspirations formation processes. Ultimately, the style of *Africa's Legends* reveals the middle-class subjects' paradoxical relationship with "the global" and "the local."

Pijnaker and Spronk understand the middle class as a class-in-practice. They consider class "performative," and analyze how "[s]tyle…signals both achievement and ongoing aspirations" for those practicing middleclassness. Pijnaker and Spronk describe their approach, writing,

> [w]e use the term middle class not so much as a category that can be found out there in society but as signifying practice … We thus approach the notion of middle class as an aspirational category…rather than a fixed category, which means that we analyse the conditions of possibility that enable the pursuit of mobility and the (desire for) concomitant middle-class dispositions.[128]

Pijnaker and Spronk do not delineate "fixed" thresholds for, or within, the middle class. Instead, middle-class individuals may be identified by their expressions of aspirations for middle-class dispositions, and the ways in which those dispositions manifest. Spronk reinforces the idea that middleclassness requires "practice" in her study about young middle-class professionals in Nairobi, Kenya (discussed earlier). Spronk writes, "the young professionals' lifestyles are not merely an expression of desires but can be understood as realizing and maintaining subjective

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[127] Pijnaker and Spronk, "Africa's Legends," 345.
[128] Ibid, 332.

realities."[129] Aspiration-holding and aspiration-realization require "maintaining" a status quo style, even as styles are "constantly restyled and remediated in the present, based on contemporary social circumstances."[130] Most important to Pijkaner and Spronk's conceptualization of Ghana's middle class, for the purpose of their article, is the game developers' commitment to the style of *Africa's Legends*.

Digital technologies like Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator helped the developers achieve a style for *Africa's Legends.* Crucial to this style were (1) the quality of the design and (2) the incorporation of "mediatized forms of [African] heritage" that would appeal to younger persons.[131] Pijnaker and Spronk describe the developers' thinking, writing,

> Leti Arts [a Ghanaian game development company]…considered the use of programs like Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop necessary for the production of what they labelled 'quality.' According to them, a more outstanding quality of the design was not only necessary for the global distribution of the app, but also for the creation of a 'new African' style. With this style the producers meant to position themselves as frontrunners of self-confidence global citizens in Ghanaian society and in Africa in general.[132]

To use the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework, Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop are capital commodities that the developers converted to an aspirational functioning: "a more outstanding quality of the design." To invoke Bourdieu's concepts of inherited and acquired capital, Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop are forms of *inherited* capital, as the developers had unparalleled access to such software during adolescence. The developers were the first Ghanaian children to grow up with access to digital technologies. Televisions provided access to international action movies and state television programs; home computers provided opportunities for at-home experimentation; international travel provided ownership of gaming devices; and the

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[129] Spronk, "Exploring the Middle," 111.
[130] Pijnaker and Spronk, "Africa's Legends," 332.
[131] Ibid, 331.
[132] Ibid.

internet provided access to transnational networks, visibility on global tech role models, familiarity with software, and (importantly) viewership of online IT tutorials.[133] Hart proposes a two-part "activation" process for inherited capital: children must convert inherited (family) capital to individual capital—a capital-to-capital conversion—before converting individual capital to capabilities, in accordance with Sen's capability approach.[134] The developers' access to technologies as children represents an intergenerational capital-to-capital conversion.

Compounding the parents' encouragement of technologies' use was their global orientation. According to Pijnaker and Spronk, the parents considered "success [as] interwoven with access to transnational opportunities and networks."[135] In the block quote on the developers' thinking, preferences derived from the developers' habitus (to use a singular noun, in accordance with Bourdieu's framework) are revealed. Considering Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator "necessary for the production of…'quality,'" and considering the app's style "necessary for [its] global distribution," are preferences. Preferences for technology and global networks are dispositional manifestations of the developers' habitus. In this way, the capability approach applies.

The developers' commitment to reaching a global audience (if only to express their global citizenship) is founded not only in the developers' habitus, but also in the global tech industry's "doxa" (norms). Pijnaker and Spronk describe how the Ghanian developers balanced expectations for "'local [African] content' [in] apps that could compete globally."[136] A competitive game could help developers "access the global," the tech industry claimed. However, the notion of a "globally competitive" app often had a sub-global (local) impetus. Pijnaker and Sprink write, "[at tech]

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133 Pijnaker and Spronk, "Africa's Legends," 334-336.
134 Hart, "Education, Inequality," 590.
135 Pijnaker and Spronk, "Africa's Legends," 334.
136 Ibid, 346.

events, NGOs and corporations encouraged the [Ghanaian] tech entrepreneurs to use technology, in particular apps, to address 'local African' issues and to present 'local African' content."[137] The industry's opportunity structure, informed by its doxa, benefitted entrepreneurs whose global brands incorporated "'local African'" content. The industry's expectation may have resonated with the developers, however, as they grew up watching Ghanaian state television programs that "promoted the idea that technology should be used by Ghanaians to address local problems."[138] The developers' habitus may have been conditioned to the tech space's dual orientations, making a game featuring African superheroes inspired by American comics *and* African folklore seem marketable.

The tech industry's expectations for the developers resembles the development industry's expectations of Everjoice J. Win. Win explains that middle-class African activists must operate in rural and global spaces, per the industry's expectations. However, unlike Win, the developers never seemed to engage with those "below" themselves. The gamers who considered *Africa's Legends* "un-African" were "less privileged" than the game's developers. The developers engaged with "less privileged" gamers to solicit feedback about *Africa's Legends,* but did not (seem to) engage them in the ideation and production processes. The developers eventually learned that the gamers "assessed quality in a different manner [than the developers, so] their opinion about the global reach of the game differed."[139] One developer even reflects that

> [i]n the years working on his technology start-up … he had learned that what he considered quality aesthetics and a presence on global digital platforms were not sufficient for an app like *Africa's Legends* to reach a global audience, since this audience was in reality heterogenous … [H]e realized that his idea of the global was a concept that inspired him, but that he also had to take into account the local realities that may contrast with his appeal to the global.[140]

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[137] Pijnaker and Spronk, "Africa's Legends," 337.
[138] Ibid, 334.
[139] Ibid, 345.
[140] Ibid, 347.

The developers' understanding of "local" changed from being cognitively bound to society-wide, thereby accounting for other stakeholders in the tech space.

To understand this thought evolution, consider how Win's development work necessitates that she engages with vulnerable groups. She even considers *herself* vulnerable. Win's interactions with those "below" herself, including her relatives, influences her aspirations-formation function. By contrast, the developers do not interact with those "below" (even those still considered middle-class, like the gamers). They, nor their parents, signal concerns about vulnerability. According to Genicot and Ray, perceptions of the society-wide income distribution (part of one's aspirations-formation function) can be cognitively "truncated": an individual would not perceive the society-wide distribution of income, but would instead perceive the income distribution among economically similar individuals.[141] Furthermore, Appadurai considers aspirations formation as dependent on social "interaction."[142] One ought to wonder whether, in the absence of feelings of vulnerability and interactions with more-vulnerable (though not definitively vulnerable) groups, the developers' aspirations window became "truncated." In turn, the developers transposed their aspirations for society on *all* Ghanaians.

John Cox on Papua New Guinea

In "Inequalities of Aspiration: Class, Cargo and the Moral Economy of Development in Papua New Guinea," anthropologist and Pacific-based development consultant John Cox explores the developmental aspirations of Papua New Guinea's middle class. He finds that middle-class individuals justify their personal aspirations as contributing to Papua New Guinea's national

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[141] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 6.
[142] Appadurai, "The Capacity," 67.

development, giving development a nation-building impetus. Cox describes how the middle class "desires to be catalysts for development among their rural kin," yet concurrent pejorative development discourses complicate this narrative.[143] Cargo cult discourse—and, more importantly, middle-class individuals' "ideological investment" in that discourse—influences interactions between Papua New Guinea's urban middle class and rural poor.[144]

"Cargo cults" are Melanesian social movements in which followers, believing deliveries of supplies (cargo) to be rewards from supernatural sources, stop maintaining their traditional resources. Cargo cults are often associated with colonialism: upon observing deliveries of supplies to colonial officials, residents sought to understand the "attendant inequalities of wealth."[145] Following the 1999 "crash" of Papua New Guinea's fast money schemes, pejorative cargo cult discourse emerged to describe the middle-class investors who lost money. Cox writes, "those [middle-class investors] were imagined to be acting according to a cargo cult mentality— unthinking, credulous and having a magical view of the production of money, consumer goods, and wealth that was divorced from the reality of labour or the discipline of saving."[146] Today, cargo cult discourse is conflated with handout discourse. Papua New Guinea's middle class, having absolved themselves of guilt for investing in fast money schemes, levies "cargo cult" accusations against the poor when their aspirations "imply mobility."[147] The middle class legitimizes its aspirations while delegitimizing those of the poor, creating "class-based inequalities of aspiration."[148]

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[143] John Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration: Class, Cargo and the Moral Economy of Development in Papua New Guinea," in *Unequal Lives Gender, Race and Class in the Western Pacific*, ed. Nicholas A. Bainton, et al., Pacific Series (ANU Press, 2021), 253, PDF.
[144] Ibid, 256.
[145] Ibid, 238.
[146] Ibid, 245.
[147] Ibid, 238.
[148] Ibid, 246.

Cox's description of Papua New Guinea's middle class aligns with other academics' descriptions. Cox emphasizes middle-class individuals' "cosmopolitan urban lifestyle," often enjoyed since childhood, which allows them to travel internationally for holidays, eat out regularly, and live in new condominiums.[149] Women especially benefit from their middle-class status, as they can pursue "projects of personal development"—a notion that Clément et al. deem important to the middle classes of Turkey, Côte d'Ivoire, Brazil, and Vietnam.[150] Regarding moral "panics" or "dilemmas," Cox writes, "[u]rban Pentecostal churches…meditate some of the *moral perils* associated with the individualism inherent in global middle-class lifestyle aspirations [emphasis added]."[151] However, most important to Cox's conceptualization of Papua New Guinea's middle class, for the purpose of his chapter, are interactions between urban professionals and their rural kin.

The following excerpt from Cox's chapter will provide context and function as a scaffold for my analysis:

> [Papua New Guinea's middle class] may struggle with the cost of living, but they experience this as a failure of the system … As the nation's skilled professionals advance through their [moral] careers, they fulfill part of the developmental destiny of [Papua New Guinea].
>
> Looking down the ladder of class, the grassroots [poor] cannot access the same career mobility. Rather, they are regarded as stationary custodians of the nation's traditional cultural heritage, grounded in subsistence agriculture. Urban grassroots [poor] are usually regarded as dangerously out of place … When articulated to middle-class actors, [their aspirations are] typically met with condescension or explicit moral condemnation.
>
> Nevertheless, even as they condemn the handout mentality, middle-class Melanesians still extend a hand to their less fortunate kin … increasingly [in] the form of 'projects.'[152]

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[149] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 229.
[150] Clément et al., "'What's in the Middle?,'" 12.
[151] Donner, "The Anthropology," n.p.; Spronk, "Exploring the Middle"; Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 250.
[152] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 259.

The reality that Papua New Guinea's middle class "may struggle with the cost of living" signals vulnerability. Cox elaborates on the class's "economic precarity"—a term whose derivates have transdisciplinary application development studies literature. The cost of living in Melanesian cities often exceeds households' budgets, yet these households often accommodate rural relatives' demands for school, medical, funeral, and brideprice payments.[153]

Interestingly, Cox implies that middle-class women are especially inclined to legitimate the poor's aspirations. In a paragraph about "middle-class people," he includes a quote singling out middle-class *women*. Cox prefaces the quote, which reads,

> [m]anaging [relatives'] demands is difficult, but many *in the middle class* are aware of their own privileges. As Spark (2018) observes, 'While *the middle class* in PNG are maligned for turning their backs on their grassroots counterparts, internationally educated and cosmopolitan *women*…are acutely aware that they are products of a context in which some are afforded more opportunities than others.' For the most part, *middle-class people* do recognise the legitimacy of [relatives'] needs, even as they try to protect themselves from an impossible deluge of demands [emphasis added].[154]

Cox refers to "many in the middle class," then "'internationally educated and cosmopolitan women," and then "middle-class people" (italicized). Does he mean to suggest that middle-class women better legitimate relatives' needs and aspirations than other middle-class persons? As Win affirms that "[t]he burden of care and support for the affected and infected [relatives] falls on the shoulders of the [African] middle-class woman," it may be Cox's intention to delineate middle-class women from Papua New Guinea's middle class.[155] In including Spark's quote, Cox conveys how middle-class women in Papua New Guinea perceive their own vulnerability and respond to others' vulnerability. Parsing Cox's generalization reinforces how middle-class persons—even

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[153] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 250.
[154] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 250; Spark (2018) in Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 250.
[155] Win, "Not Very," 62.

those in the same household, with the same relatives—experience vulnerability and middleclassness differently.

While Papua New Guinea's middle class may have "strained" household budgets, they do not seem to consider themselves "vulnerable to cargo cult thinking."[156] The vulnerability approach assesses a person's susceptibly to descents. In Papua New Guinea, the rural poor are seen as more susceptible to cargo-cult-induced descents than the middle class. Despite having lost money in the 1990's fast money schemes, middle-class persons promote the few success stories of those who did not lose money.[157] This narrative is misleading, as Cox interviewed dozens of former investors, and only *two* made money.[158] In commanding cargo cult discourse, the middle class foisted a *perception* of vulnerability on the rural poor. These perceptions further legitimate the middle class's aspirations and further delegitimate the poor's aspirations—a reality that confirms Tiwari's idea (from the capability approach) that "some of the 'means' by which the [middle class] are achieving [their aspirations]…often [restrict] the aspirations and the freedoms of the marginalised communities."[159] How the middle class commands perceptions of vulnerability, in addition to experiencing vulnerability themselves, is important for understanding Papua New Guinea's middle class.

As another means to delegitimate the poor's aspirations, Papua New Guinea's middle class promotes narratives about the poor's *frustrated* aspirations. In the "scaffold" quote above, Cox writes, "[u]rban grassroots are usually regarded as dangerously out of place [by the middle class]" for being urban, not rural.[160] He elaborates, saying,

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[156] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 250.
[157] Ibid, 245.
[158] Ibid, 246.
[159] Tiwari, "Capability of Capabilities," 431.
[160] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 259.

[the 'cargoist'] narrative is also used to explain why young men turn to petty violence and crime—they crave goods and lifestyles that are beyond their financial reach and so attempt to gain them by force. While there exist realities of crime and violence in urban settlements, blaming urbanization ignores the prevalence of rural violence and rests on a national mythology that romanticises villages.[161]

Genicot and Ray's theory of frustrated aspirations, in which a too-large aspirations gap induces frustration, applies.[162] The phrase "goods and lifestyles are beyond…financial reach" suggests an aspiration gap, and "[turn]ing to petty violence and crime" suggests frustration. In "Aspirations and Inequality"—a title that invokes Cox's argument about "class-based inequalities of aspiration"—Genicot and Ray write,

> [w]hat fails is not the aspiration, but the ability to live up to it, [which] suggests caution in the empirical implementation of [aspirations] theory, urging researchers to properly distinguish between the absence of aspirations, and the frustration induced by bars that are set too high.[163]

Papua New Guinea's middle class does not deny that the poor aspire; rather, the implications of their *aspiring* concern the middle class. As the rural poor are supposed to be "stationary custodians of [Papua New Guinea's] traditional cultural heritage," their aspirations for mobility impel the middle class's cargo cult discourse.[164] Such discourse deems the rural poor "unable to handle" what is not "traditional"—especially capital accumulation.[165] In applying Genicot and Ray's observations, it seems that Papua New Guinea's middle class assumes that the rural poor will fail "to live up to" its aspirations for mobility. Assumptions about frustrated aspirations, validated by "realities of crime and violence in urban settlements," further delegitimize the rural poor's aspirations.

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[161] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 248.
[162] Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 1.
[163] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 246; Genicot and Ray, *Aspirations and Inequality*, 12.
[164] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 259.
[165] Ibid; 246, 259.

All this said, many in Papua New Guinea's middle class aspire to retire in rural villages. Middle-class persons "more often" anticipate retiring in villages, and therefore must make "ongoing contributions."[166] Some seek a "peaceful village life," but villages are also imbued with cultural significance.[167] While the aspirations of the rural poor may seem problematic to the middle class, the middle class also aspires to a rural lifestyle—a paradox. Cox says that Andrew, one of his middle-class informants, "imagines rural life as paradisiacal, where life is timeless and work in subsistence horticulture is easy."[168] Cox continues, writing, "[for Andrew] and many others, the work that people do in their gardens could not be as important or rewarding as [other work]."[169] Andrew criticizes *and* idealizes the rural poor's subsistence lifestyle. A village retirement befits middle-class persons and may be considered a legitimate aspiration. The Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework applies: if a village retirement is an aspiration, then "extend[ing] a hand to…less fortunate kin" and "referring to local desires as a 'cargo' mentality" may be considered capabilities, and the economic and social capital required to "extend a hand" and levy accusations may be considered capital commodities.

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[166] Cox, "Inequalities of Aspiration," 239.
[167] Ibid, 251.
[168] Ibid, 255.
[169] Ibid, 255.

Conclusion

Despite arbitrary definitions for the middle class, certain approaches (dimensions) have transdisciplinary application. These approaches—vulnerability, capability, and aspirations—transpose principles from economics to case studies in anthropology. From Luis F. Lopez-Calva and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez, we learn about vulnerability as a proximity to a poverty threshold. From Amartya Sen, we learn about processes that convert resources to functionings. From Garance Genicot and Debraj Ray, we learn about "truncated" aspirations, aspiration gaps, and frustrated aspirations. The literature of Everjoice J. Win, Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk, and John Cox serve as "sites" for transposing the vulnerability, capability, and aspirations approaches to demonstrate their transdisciplinary application through semantic analysis.

While I have established that defining the middle class myself would be unproductive, I can claim that a specific conceptualization of the middle class, of the many I analyzed, contains the most promise for its transdiplincary impetus. In the introduction of their book *Middle Classes in Africa,* Lena Kroeker, David O'Kane, and Tabea Scharrer write,

> [e]ven where people do not use the term 'middle class' as a self-description, their socio-economic positionings still [influence] their lives. For us, the middle classes are those who stand in a middle ground. It is important to know how this middle is defined in the local context, because it is through such local definitions of the 'middle' that middle classes emerge. The socioeconomic status of middle classes is a relatively advanced one—at least in comparison to the poor—and they [can] make choices beyond those that concern basic needs. This ability to choose may create opportunities to invest in the future. It can lead to a heterogeneity of lifestyles and economic strategies. Such an ability implies heterogeneous outcomes in terms of social identities and social structures. The plurality of lifestyles in the middle ground means that those who occupy it manifest various social entanglements with, and social mobility between, those classes above and below it.[170]

For recognizing the middle class's implied and understood centrality, local contexts and definitions, income differential with the poor, its ability to aspire for something beyond the

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[170] Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer, *Middle Classes*, 9.

essentials of survival, its opportunity structure, its heterogeneity, its social "entanglements" and mobility, and its propensity to consider those "above" and "below," I claim that *this* conceptualization is a model for a transdisciplinary "definition" of the middle class in developing countries.

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