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A ticking time bomb. The impact of objective class and stratification beliefs on societal conflict perceptions in South Africa.

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A ticking time bomb. The impact of objective class and stratification beliefs on societal conflict perceptions in South Africa.

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Abstract

In South Africa, inequality has worsened over the past two decades, leading to the country being recognized as the most unequal society globally. The escalating inequality has sparked social conflicts, posing a threat to the already fragile social cohesion. However, there is limited understanding of public perceptions regarding these conflicts, which are crucial for comprehending their dynamics. To shed light on this issue, we utilize the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) dataset to investigate the factors influencing perceived social conflict in South Africa. Our findings reveal that objective class plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of social conflict, aligning with the Marxist notion of the link between class and conflict perceptions in the country. Moreover, beliefs about stratification, such as perceived inequality and tolerance for inequality, also exert a considerable influence on perceived social conflict. Overall, these results offer valuable insights for policymakers in their efforts to address the pressing issues of class, conflict, and inequality, particularly in the aftermath of the July 2021 unrest when South Africa continues to grapple with social instability caused by deep class divisions.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in social unrest events across various regions. These incidents have encompassed a range of movements, from the Pots and Pans revolution in Iceland following the 2008 financial crisis (Bernberg, 2016), to the 2010-2012 Arab Spring revolt in the Middle East and North Africa (Keskin, 2015), to the destructive July 2021 riots in South Africa (Chetty et al., 2022). Although these events unfolded in different parts of the world, they shared similarities in their protest against authoritarian regimes, high levels of corruption, and economic inequality. Consequently, rising trends of global inequality have been accompanied by a surge of social unrest, reigniting scholarly interest in the relationship between inequality and vertical social conflict in modern society (Kerbo, 2012).

In line with Karl Marx's theory on social class, vertical social conflict can arise from the increasing gap between the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the exploited working class (proletariat). In theory, as the economic divide between the rich and poor grow larger, the poor

will become more class concise and the inherent contradictions between the ruling and working class eventually lead to class struggle and redistribution revolutions. Although Marx's ideas about the conflict were developed in a different historical context; it can still offer a critical lens through which to understand class conflict and contemporary social unrest events in developing countries. Take South Africa, since the end of apartheid the chasm between the rich and the poor, often defined by racial lines, has remained stubbornly high and has even shown increasing tendencies. Not only is South Africa regarded as the most unequal society in the world but record also high-income polarization, high levels of corruption, and low social mobility for those at the lower end of the distribution (Schotte et al., 2018; Bhorat et al., 2019). With this South Africa's young democracy has also faced many societal challenges related to political and social unrest. In 2012, 34 platinum mine workers lost their lives to demand fair remuneration (Bond and Mottiar, 2013). This came to be known as the Marikana Massacre and represented a pivotal moment in post-apartheid South Africa. The Marikana massacre was followed by the Fees Must Fall movement between 2015 and 2017, a movement against the rising costs of tuition fees and lack of access to education. Moreover, in 2021 South Africa suffered from its worst civil protest since the end of apartheid, thousands of unemployed and working class took to the streets, shops and factories were looted, lives were lost, and widespread destruction of the property led to one of the darkest post-apartheid days in South Africa's young democratic history. While the civil unrest in 2021 was mainly driven by political ideology, the dire economic conditions of the poor played a large part in the mobilization of those protesting against extreme levels of inequality and unemployment.

In light of the rising levels of inequality and contemporary social protests, we aim to address the vertical conflict around socioeconomic positions, power and resources in South Africa. With an increasingly wide gap between those on top and bottom of society, high corruption, political distrust and low levels of social mobility for the unemployed and working class, all the ingredients are there for a full-scale working-class uprising in South Africa, similar and more intense than what we saw in July 2021. But then the question remains why this has not happened and what will push it over the edge? To shed light on these questions a clear understanding is needed about how people in South Africa view social conflict and inequality. Mainly because people's behaviour can be determined by their subjective construction of reality rather than by objective reality (Thomas and Thomas, 1928; Yamamura, 2016, Must, 2016). How people, therefore, perceive societal conflict (PSC) is as much if not more important than understanding their objective realities. It is how individuals perceive social surroundings of inequality, class and conflict social conflict that drive their action towards these social issues. Social perceptions have also been shown to play a role in the democratic attitudes of individuals (Zagórski, 2006), and a better understanding should add further insight into the dynamics behind political attitudes in South Africa.

Moreover, the increase in social unrest events in South Africa creates the need for more insight into how social conflict perceptions are determined in this highly unequal society. While a large body of literature has assessed the dynamics behind social conflict perceptions in the developed north (Evans and Kelley, 1995; Zagórski, 2006; Hertel and Schöneck, 2022), South Africa remains underrepresented. By assessing the dynamics behind perceived social conflict in South Africa we main to make several contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, we aim to provide a novel study with some of the first insights into conflict perceptions in South Africa and relate these perceptions to objective class and subjective stratification beliefs. Secondly, using the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data for the years 2009 and 2019, we attempt to analyze the impact of objective class positions, subjective stratification and perceived inequality on the perceived social conflict over time. Given South Africa has gone

through significant social change, there is a need to assess the changing public perceptions, however, South Africa remains heavily under-researched in the public perceptions sphere. This information could be helpful for policymakers, as it will allow the government to better understand public perception changes and how to address the public when social unrest events arise and threaten to destabilize the system. Lastly, assessing the perceived conflict individuals hold in a highly unequal South African society should provide vital insight into the dynamics behind political attitudes and voting behaviour in South Africa since “perceptions of class conflict shape people's images of conflicts in the political arena, and hence shape their perceptions of their political self-interest. These perceptions, therefore, influence which party they support” (Evans and Kelley, 1995: 161).

2. Theoretical framework

Perceived social conflict (PSC) is defined as the way individuals view related distributional conflict and could provide helpful insight into the political attitudes individuals hold (Evans and Kelley, 1995), and the degree of social cohesion perceived in society (Delhey and Keck, 2008). The concept of perceived social conflict can mainly be underpinned by the conflict theory of Karl Marx. Marx's conflict theory states that society exists in a perpetual state of conflict, rather than harmony, due to competition for finite resources. According to Marx the divide between the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and working class (proletariat) would enhance class conflict between those who own the factors of production and those who don't. As the economic divide between these two groups grows larger, due to higher inequality, the working class would become more aware of their adverse position in society, leading to a stronger tendency to act upon their exploited position. For Marx, the distributional divide between those on top and those at the bottom would drive the lower class from being a class in itself to a class for itself, all within the scope that these lower-class individuals know their lowly position in society. Ultimately this would fuel vertical class conflicts because of the exploitation-driven capitalist mode of production (Wright, 1997). The theory is centred around the lower classes as they are the ones who would gain the most from income redistribution, while those at the top oppose class conflict since they will be disadvantaged by any class conflict that leads to income redistribution. Supportively, Wright (1989) found that class consciousness and conflict perceptions were heavily linked, where the lower classes, who become more aware of their lowly and exploited position in society would then tend to strongly support conflictual, pro-working-class policies, while those in higher class positions tend to favour non-conflictual redistribution agendas (Corneo and Gruner, 2000; Schoneck and Mau, 2015).

However, the materialist's view of a strong relationship between class, inequality and class conflict can also be muted through subjectivist theories that include stratification beliefs and reference group comparisons. The reference group and social comparison theorists focus on the role of reference groups when determining class perceptions. Showing that the inequality and conflict perceptions relation are muted by the reference group lens individuals use to compare themselves to others. Objective factors and socioeconomic positions only matter within this reference, and because reference groups are usually constructed between friends, family and work similar colleagues, there is a breakdown between objective inequality, class class-consciousness and perceived class conflict. Kelley and Evans (1995) further explain that very few people experience class conflict situations in their everyday life, and therefore, perceptions of class conflict are observed through their reference group. These cross-class engagements, usually between family and friends, typically do not lead to conflict, and those who create conflict do not endure. As well said by Kelley and Evans (1995:160), ‘your dinner guests rarely accuse you of being a class enemy, and those who do are not invited back.’ Overall, Kelley and Evans (1995) propose a blended model to determine the driving forces

behind the perceived social conflict, including objective inequality and subjective perceptions as determining factors for how individuals perceive class tensions in society.

Within the subjectivist scope, social conflict perceptions can also be linked to stratification beliefs like class imagery, aggregate perceived inequality and the legitimacy of inequality. Class imagery refers specifically to the categories respondents choose when asked to identify a class system they feel best describes their society (Oddsson, 2018). Empirical evidence shows that there is a strong tendency for individuals to perceive a middle-class society. One where most of the people fall within the middle class, with few at the bottom and top. This popular class imagery view is mostly due to reference group homogeneity that leads to a high degree of a middle-class lens even in adversely unequal societies. Therefore, middle-class imagery dilutes objective inequality and reduces its impact on inequality perceptions (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022).

Moreover, people tend to view inequality as highly conflictual if they feel inequality is high and illegitimate (Thompson, 1980). However, inequality legitimization has become a central theme in the objective-subjective inequality discussion, where studies find that even in highly unequal societies there is a strong sense of inequality legitimization that could distort conflict perceptions. In theory, in highly unequal societies, where individuals have a strong view of inequality being illegitimate and expect social mobility, their views would fuel conflict perceptions (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). This might be strongest in a middle-class society, where people expect to move up the social ladder, and would quickly go into protest if their hopes of mobility are dashed while those on top of the ladder further move up (Chetty et al., 2017). However, if individuals hold a strong view that their society is a middle-class society and most of the people around them are on the same social ladder, the need for upward mobility and protest would be diluted and there will be low vertical conflict.

Overall, the dynamics behind conflictual perceptions are multidimensional and could be influenced by both objective (material) positions and subjective stratification components (Evans and Kelley, 1995; Hertel and Schöneck, 2022). Moreover, the dynamics behind perceived social conflict also differ by society, and studies especially show that the perceived conflict situations are higher when society has higher objective inequality (Edlund and Lindh, 2015). We aim to build on this existing literature and derive three hypotheses based on the current literature on the dynamics behind PSC in a highly unequal South African setting.

H1: Objective class positions influence PSC in a highly unequal society, supporting the Marxist theory of high inequality, high-class consciousness and conflict perceptions.

H2: The middle-class imagery dilutes the impact of objective class positions on PSC.

H2: Given the high level of inequality, inequality and tolerance perceptions are seen as significant determinants of PSC.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Data

To test these hypotheses and assesses the dynamics behind the perceived social conflict, class positions, and stratification beliefs we use the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Social inequality module dataset. The ISSP dataset includes South Africa as a sampled country in its 2009 and 2019 surveys and captures vital information about societal conflict perceptions, stratification beliefs and economic characteristics.

3.2 Perceived social conflict

To measure perceived social conflict, a combination of questions is used in the ISSP Social Inequality dataset. The ISSP survey asked individuals; in all countries, there are differences or even conflicts between different social groups. In your opinion, in <country> how much conflict is there between? Respondents are then asked to rate the following conflicts between poor and rich people, the working class and middle class, management, and workers (ISSP, 2017). These questions are divided into three themes, the income theme (rich versus poor), the class theme (working vs middle class) and the labour theme (workers versus management). The rating system then included options, (1) very strong conflicts, (2) strong conflicts, (3) not very strong conflicts, and (4) there were no conflicts. In line with the literature (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022), the study recorded the conflict ratings from 0 (no conflicts) to 3 (very strong conflicts) for each one of the conflict events. Individuals' responses for the three conflict themes were then added to form one variable, a continuous additive scale ranging from 0 (minimum) to 9 (maximum). The numerical value for each respondent is positively related to their perceived conflict rating. The higher individuals perceive conflict in South African society, the higher they will fall on the perceived social conflict scale.

Since the income, class and labour themes should be highly related but still capture different elements of vertical conflict, we also estimated a PSC index that captures all three themes using exploratory factor analysis. Looking at the reliability and validity of this PSC index we observe the Bartlett test of sphericity, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, and Cronbach Alpha. The Bartlett test is significant for all measures and confirms significant intercorrelations among items to conduct factors analysis. The KMO test also reports enough overlap between items to conduct factor analysis since the KMO estimated value exceeds the rule of thumb of 0.5. Lastly, Cronbach Alpha shows that the PSC index is reliable with a high Cronbach Alpha score (results in the appendix). We also use the PSC index as robustness for the mean PSC score in the analysis.

3.3 Objective class measurement

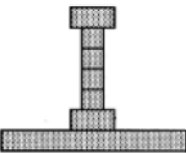
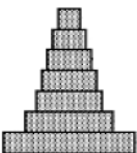

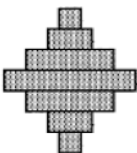
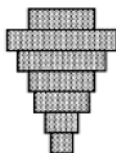
There is extensive research on objective measures used to determine social class positions. While some scholars use income or education as central indicators, one of the most effective measures is considered to be the occupation measure known as the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) class scheme. This scheme groups individuals based on their employment relations, distinguishing between employees, employers, and the self-employed. It also considers variations in employment contracts and service relationships. The EGP scheme is preferred over income as it provides a clearer classification of individuals into class categories. Numerous studies have validated the use of the EGP scheme for social class analysis, showing its theoretical foundation and consequential effects on political behaviour and intergenerational mobility (Sosnaud et al., 2013). This study follows the EGP three-class system and aligns with Goldthorpe's theoretical framework. The individual occupation levels reported in the ISSP survey, using occupational classifications (ISCO88 and ISCO08), are used to construct the ten-class EGP scheme, which is then condensed into a three-class system for comparability with subjective identification. The three-class system includes the higher class, middle class, and lower class, with specific occupational categories falling into each group. However, due to high unemployment rates in South Africa, only around 70% of the population can be captured using this scheme. We treat the unemployed as a separate social group but exclude them from the analysis due to the difficulty of identifying their class position from the individual-level ISSP dataset.

3.4 Stratification beliefs

Measuring stratification beliefs have received much attention. Stratification beliefs are essentially attempting to understand respondents' views about the class structure they deem

representative of a country's objective stratification. Respondents' views would range from the inegalitarian type of society to those with a more equal spread of distribution or egalitarianism. To observe this, Evans and Kelley (1992) devised graphical demonstrations to identify the class structure most representative of the respondent's country. Individuals can choose between five different diagrams on how they perceive South African society (refer to Figure 1). Individuals who chose type A believe that most of society is located at the bottom, very few at the top, and almost no one in the middle. Thereafter types B and C are more of a pyramid-type scheme and type D are seen as middle-class societies (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022) with most located in the middle of society. While type E is centrally placing primary emphasis on the upper class.

Figure 1. Stratification beliefs

Q14. These five diagrams show different types of society. Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes <country> ..				
				
Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom.	A society like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom.	A pyramid except that just a few people are at the bottom.	A society with most people in the middle.	Many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom.

Source: ISSP 2009 Social Inequality Module IV questionnaire

3.5 Inequality perceptions

Other stratification beliefs are related to the level of inequality perceived in society. Perceived inequality has two aspects: the actual perceived level of inequality that people view as present in society, and personal norms of inequality or perceived inequality tolerance. To measure perceived inequality, we utilized a question from the ISSP survey that asked individuals whether they believe income differences in their country are too large. The measure was recorded from its five-point Likert scale into a dichotomous variable. This measure of perceived inequality has been extensively used in the literature to determine whether individuals believe inequality is too high in their country (Roberts, 2014; Kuhn, 2019; Choi, 2019).

Inequality tolerance or normative views of inequality were measured by assessing the perceived wage gap that should exist between top-earning and bottom-earning occupations, consistent with other studies (Kuhn, 2019; Chou, 2021). The top-earning occupations included doctors and doctors in general practice, a cabinet minister in the national government, and chairman of a large national corporation. The bottom-earning occupations included wage estimations for an unskilled factory worker and a shop assistant. The mean top and bottom wages were then used to calculate the top/bottom ratio, which was logged, to determine the inequality tolerance among respondents.

3.6 Control variables

Consistent with the literature, various control variables were included based on the demographic information of the respondents. These include gender, race, age and location (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022)

3.7 Methodology

This study employs the ordered probit model to examine the relationship between variables of interest. The ordered probit model is a statistical technique used to analyze ordinal dependent variables, where the outcomes are ordered into multiple categories or levels. In our case, this model is appropriate for investigating the factors influencing perceived social conflict. We specify the model as follows:

$$Y^* = X\beta + \varepsilon$$

Where Y^* represents the latent variable underlying the observed ordinal outcomes. X denotes a matrix of independent variables that we hypothesize are associated with social unrest events. β represents the vector of coefficients that measure the impact of each independent variable on the latent variable. ε represents the error term. To ensure the robustness of our findings, we perform various sensitivity analyses and robustness checks. This includes using the OLS, using alternative measures for PSC, controlling for additional variables, and assessing the stability of our results over different periods.

4. Empirical Analysis

To start the analysis, we provide some statistical information about PSC trends in South Africa. Table 1 reports the responses to PSC statements as a percentage contribution. As with the overall measure of perceived social conflict, the PSC is divided into three themes, the income theme (rich versus poor), the class theme (working vs middle class) and the labour theme (workers versus management). The income theme shows that there has been an increase in the number of respondents that have strong views about the conflict between the rich and the poor. The class theme, similarly, shows that there has been an overall increase in the number of respondents who believed in a strong social conflict between different classes. Among the most significant conflict perception changes were in the class theme where there was an 11.47% increase in the number of people that believed in a strong conflict between the working and middle (upper) classes. The most significant decline was among the labour theme, where a 9.3% decline was observed for strong labour market conflicts. This might have something to do with the increase in the minimum wage and other labour market policies aimed at protecting low-skilled workers (Bhorat and Khan, 2018). The three societal conflict themes (income, class and labour) were combined to form the PSC measure, which is an overall measure for PSC. Overall, the mean PSC has increased from 5.00 in 2009 to 5.20 in 2019. This confirms the above patterns that overall perceived social conflict has increased in South Africa during the 10 years. The increasing pattern of PSC is in line with the rising level of social unrest events and provides further reasoning to assess the relationship between inequality and PSC in South Africa.

Table 1: Perceived societal conflict in South Africa over time.

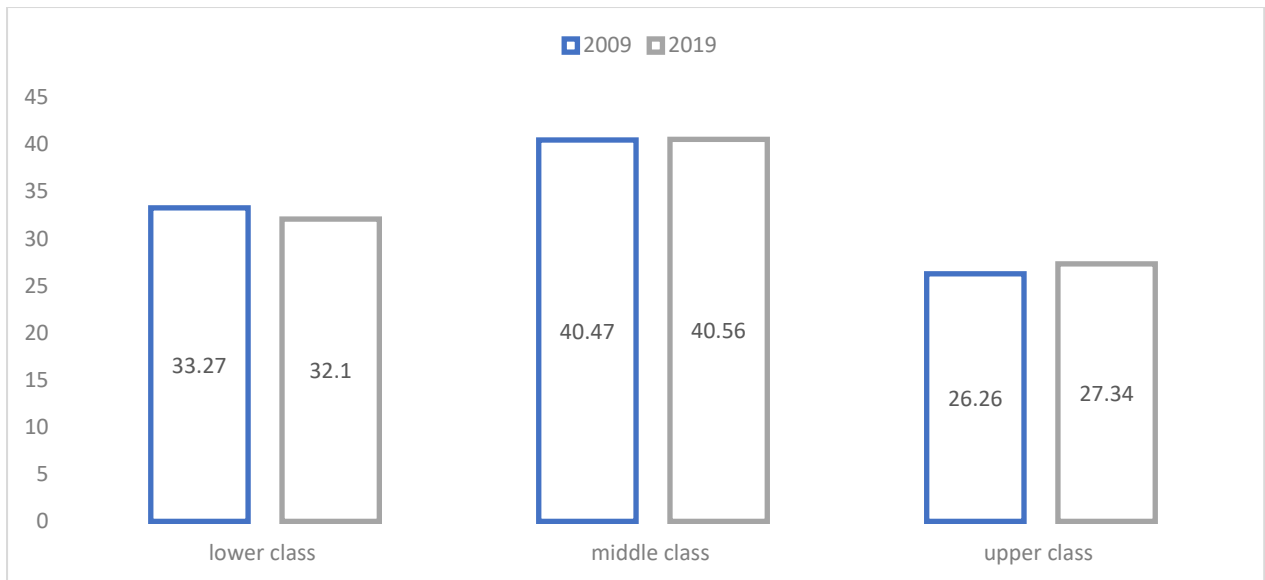
	2009	2019	Change
Perceived social conflict	% of respondents		
Income conflict			
Very strong conflict	24.36	24.18	-0.18
strong conflict	33.22	40.96	7.74

Not very strong conflict	24.2	21.82	-2.38
There are no conflicts	18.22	13.04	-5.18
Class conflict			
Very strong conflict	15.73	16.97	1.24
strong conflict	30.08	41.55	11.47
Not very strong conflict	35.07	26.77	-8.3
There are no conflicts	19.12	14.71	-4.41
Labour conflict			
Very strong conflict	32.03	22.73	-9.3
strong conflict	37.19	44.69	7.5
Not very strong conflict	21.78	22.5	0.72
There are no conflicts	9.01	10.09	1.08
Mean PSC measure	5.00	5.20	0.20

Various studies have reported that income inequality has increased in South Africa since the end of apartheid (Leibbrandt, 2012; Posel & Rogan, 2019; Kerr & Wittenberg, 2021). Moreover, studies have found evidence of significant income polarization and that low social mobility policies have assisted with the support of the lower class therefore the gap between the middle and lower class has narrowed, but this change has been overshadowed by the widening gap between those on top of the social ladder and those in the middle. Mainly because of the high-income polarization and struggling nature of the middle class (Tregenna and Tsela, 2012; Borat and Khan, 2018).

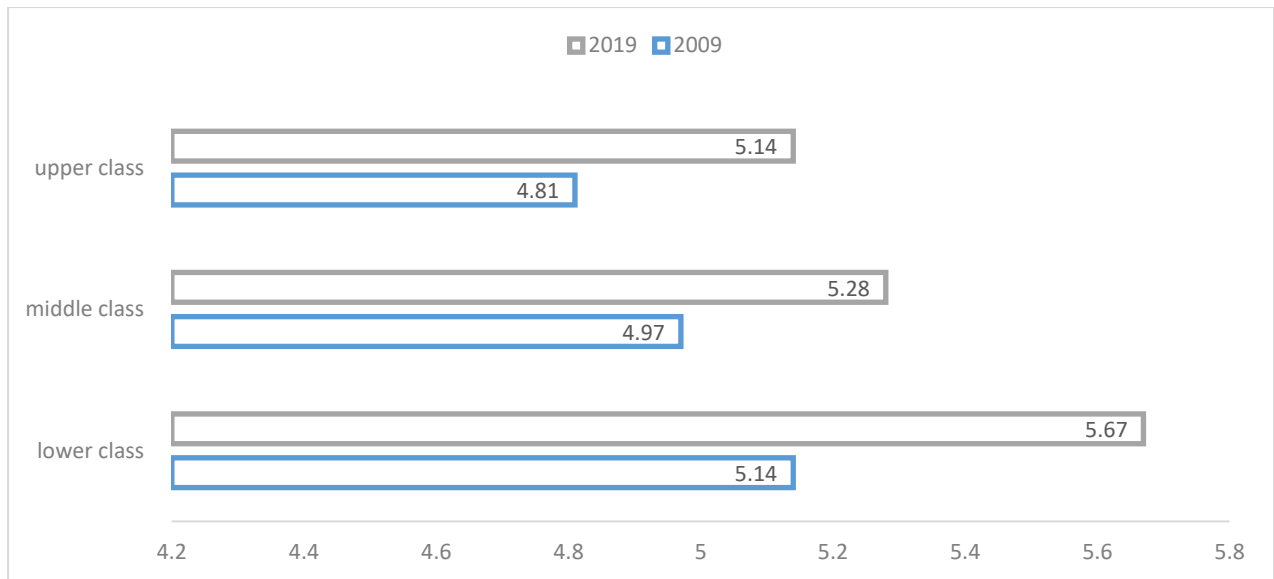
Figure 2 below shows the size of the lower, middle and upper class using the ISSP dataset. By using the EGP class scheme, the middle class make up the largest class. However, it should be noted again that the unemployed most of whom are essentially lower class, are excluded from this analysis due to class identification difficulties. The lower class is therefore heavily underrepresented and includes only working lower class members, which in some definitions are considered vulnerable middle class. It is also important to note that the class sizes have stayed relatively the same throughout the two periods and the share of individuals in the lower class is above the upper class but has also declined slightly while the middle class has increased slightly. This probably points to the workings of the pro-poor policies in South Africa that have led to a slight upward movement of some lower-class individuals into the middle class. Although the ISSP dataset does not allow us to track the same individuals over time or report on each class share of welfare, it does present consistent results with the current picture of class in South Africa (Burger et al., 2015; Schotte et al., 2018).

Figure 2: Objective class sizes in South Africa



After observing the changes in PSC and objective class positions, we can now combine the two and assess the trends behind PSC for different objective class positions. Figure 3 below shows the mean PSC scores among members of different objective class positions for the sample years, 2009 and 2019. As expected, PSC scores are highest among the lower class, consistent with the materialistic view of conflict perceptions (Wright, 1989). Individuals in the lower classes tend to strongly support conflictual, pro-working-class policies and have stronger views about vertical conflict. Looking at the change in PSC mean scores among different class groups shows that PSC scores are higher for all class schemes in 2019 compared to 2009, confirming the increasing nature of perceived conflict perceptions in South Africa. It should be noted that the most significant increase was among the lower class where the mean PSC value has increased from 5.14 to 5.67. Again, this confirms that perceptions of societal conflict are increasing, especially among the lower class, supporting the Marxist relationship between inequality, class conflict and conflict perceptions.

Figure 3: PSC mean values and objective class positions.



As noted in the literature, the material aspect of perceived social conflict is just one of the driving forces behind PSC. In line with the subjectivist view, we also assess the relationship between PSC and various stratification beliefs. Table 2 provides insight into the relationship between PSC and class imagery among South Africans. These class imagery types represent different views individuals have about the stratification design in South Africa, moving from more Type A (most unequal) to Type D (most egalitarian). According to a recent study by Hertel and Schöneck (2022), people who believe society is middle-class centred (Type D) would perceive lower social conflicts. This is one of the hypotheses we test, and it is also important to note South Africans' perceptions of class structures have changed significantly. More than 50% viewed Type A as the dominant class structure in South Africa in 2009, however in 2019 only around 31% believed Type A to be the dominant class structure in South Africa. This is mainly because more South Africans viewed Type C and D as the dominant class structures in 2019 compared to 2009 (results in the appendix). Type C and D are mainly middle-class societies, where a large share of people fall in the middle of the class structure. Overall, South Africans are increasingly seeing South Africa as a middle-class society, so assessing the impact of middle-class imagery on perceived social conflict is vital.

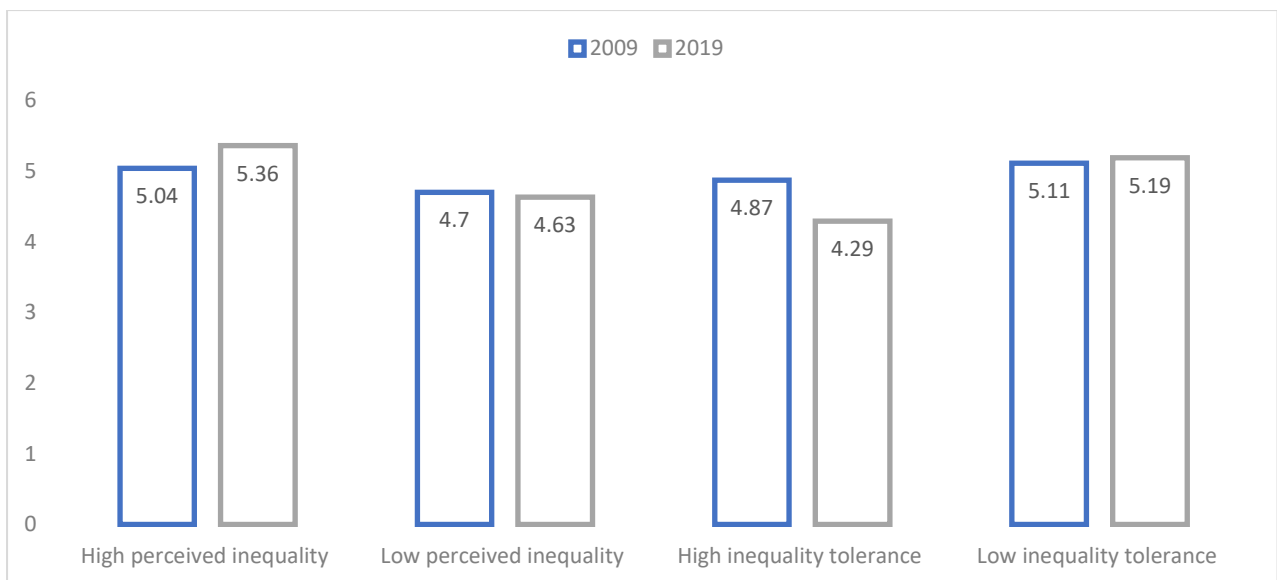
The results in Table 2 show the highest PSC mean score in 2009 is among those who believe in Type A and Type E, the two extremes. While Type D ranks second lowest. However, observing the change to 2019, we can see that the PSC score increases significantly for Type D, indicating that middle-class imagery might lead to higher perceived conflict in South Africa. Based on the reference group argument, this goes against international findings that middle-class imagery should lead to lower perceived social conflict (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022). Our regression analysis provides more information on this phenomenon. Moreover, the lowest PSC score is found for Type E, consistent with the literature, that those who believe in an egalitarian society also perceive less vertical conflict.

Table 2: Mean scores of PSC by stratification beliefs.

	2009	2019
Type A	5.21	5.32
Type B	4.84	5.2
Type C	5.02	5.07
Type D	4.97	5.48

Furthermore, we include additional measures of stratification beliefs, perceived inequality and inequality tolerance. These two measures provide better insight into how respondents feel about inequality, historically a key determinant in the level of perceived social conflict. Figure 4 below shows the mean PSC scores for different levels of perceived and tolerated inequality in South Africa. Observingly, the figure shows respondents who have high perceived inequality and low inequality tolerance reported on average higher PSC scores than those who view low perceived inequality and high inequality tolerance. This makes sense since those who feel inequality is too high and don't tolerate a lot of inequality would strongly view vertical conflict present in society and support pro-redistribution policies.

Figure 4: Perceived inequality and PSC



Finally, after assessing the trends of perceived social conflict, objective class positions and stratification beliefs the final part of the analysis includes running a stepwise ordered probit model analyzing the impact of objective class positions and stratification beliefs on perceived social conflict (table 3 below). Observing the first variable of interest in this study, objective class positions, the results show that being in the middle class and upper class leads to lower levels of PSC. Meaning the higher an individual's class position the lower their perceived social conflict. Although less significant in 2009, objective class positions are highly significant in 2019. This reinforces the Marxist idea of a strong relationship between class positions and perceived class conflict. Suggesting that in South Africa higher levels of inequality and class divide lead to higher levels of perceived social conflict among those in the lower class.

Literature suggests that objective inequality is only part of the story and stratification beliefs also tend to influence perceived social conflict (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022). The second variable of interest is middle-class imagery. The results show that believing in middle-class imagery is insignificant, meaning perceiving the country as a middle-class society does not lead individuals to perceive either higher or lower societal conflict. This is in contrast to international literature (Hertel and Schöneck, 2022), and might point to the heterogenous dynamics of what is perceived as a middle-class society. One explanation for this could be the

struggling nature of the middle class, even though some people view South Africa as a middle-class society, still does not entice them to perceive lower societal conflict. Instead, the high-class divide and many social unrest events make them feel societal conflict is high even in a perceived middle-class society.

Moving to the third and fourth variables of interest, perceived inequality and inequality tolerance, the results show that perceived inequality is negatively related to PSC in both the 2009 and 2019 models. This strongly indicates that perceiving higher levels of inequality leads to lower perceived social conflict. Inequality tolerance however is only significant in 2009 and not in 2019, possibly indicating the declining role of inequality tolerance in perceived social conflict among South Africans. This might be due to the persistence of inequality that has changed the way individuals tolerate inequality in South Africa. These results are somewhat against the literature, but with most literature focussing on multi-county analysis with an under-representation of the African continent, these results might show the heterogeneous factors influencing perceived social conflict in an individual-level African country.

In terms of the control variables, gender and race are significant, while age and location are insignificant. Since current inequality is still linked to the lingering legacy of colonialism and apartheid it is worthy to note the impact of race and gender on PSC. For example, gender is positive and significant across both the 2009 and 2019 models, indicating the persistent impact of gender. Given the coefficient is positive it indicates that females on average perceive higher levels of PSC than males. Looking at race, both Indian/Asian and White population groups perceive on average higher levels of PSC compared to Africans. Especially for the White population group, which has significant coefficients for both 2009 and 2019, is strongly perceiving less social conflict compared to Africans. These results confirm that those who were previously discriminated against perceive on average higher levels of perceived social conflict compared to those who weren't.

To check for the robustness of these results, an Ordinary Least Square estimation was conducted, and an alternative measure of PSC was used. Firstly, the OLS regression reports similar results to the ordered probit model and confirms the importance of objective class positions and various stratification beliefs in the PSC model. Secondly, using an index measure for PSC, similarly show that objective class positions, perceived inequality and inequality tolerance are significant determinants of PSC. Overall, these robustness measures confirm the validity of the perceived social conflict results reported in Table 3 and provide clear evidence behind the strengthening relationship between PSC, objective class positions and stratification beliefs in South Africa.

Table 3: Ordered probit regression models predicting perceived social conflict.

	(2009)	(2009)	(2009)	(2009)	(2019)	(2019)	(2019)	(2019)
VARIABLES	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Middle class	-0.0833	-0.0610	-0.0377	-0.0369	-0.155	-0.139	-0.249**	-0.250**

	(0.0599)	(0.0604)	(0.0621)	(0.0633)	(0.106)	(0.112)	(0.120)	(0.120)
Upper class	-0.154**	-0.136**	-0.0360	-0.0325	-0.231*	-0.209*	-0.271**	-0.279**
	(0.0665)	(0.0672)	(0.0707)	(0.0719)	(0.119)	(0.125)	(0.132)	(0.132)
Middle-class imagery		0.00937	0.0266	0.0266		0.0786	0.102	0.0923
		(0.103)	(0.104)	(0.104)		(0.149)	(0.150)	(0.150)
Perceived inequality		0.256**	0.252**	0.252**		0.432***	0.419**	0.407**
		(0.115)	(0.115)	(0.115)		(0.163)	(0.164)	(0.165)
Inequality tolerance		-0.0605**	-0.0675**	-0.0679**		0.0213	0.0154	0.0189
		(0.0282)	(0.0283)	(0.0283)		(0.0427)	(0.0430)	(0.0431)
Female			-0.0140	-0.0154			0.332***	0.342***
			(0.0530)	(0.0530)			(0.101)	(0.101)
Coloured			-0.0116	0.00212			-0.133	-0.140
			(0.0672)	(0.0694)			(0.140)	(0.142)
Indian/Asian			-0.482***	-0.465***			0.225	0.210
			(0.0792)	(0.0829)			(0.139)	(0.144)
White			-0.252***	-0.226***			-0.416**	-0.417**
			(0.0825)	(0.0864)			(0.165)	(0.167)
Age				-0.00192				-0.00283
				(0.00190)				(0.00316)
Urban				-0.0351				0.0719
				(0.0670)				(0.118)
/cut1	-1.715***	-1.613***	-1.730***	-1.827***	-1.591***	-1.094***	-1.083***	-1.161***
	(0.0639)	(0.141)	(0.145)	(0.170)	(0.107)	(0.201)	(0.210)	(0.262)
/cut2	-1.401***	-1.288***	-1.402***	-1.500***	-1.383***	-0.903***	-0.884***	-0.962***
	(0.0571)	(0.138)	(0.142)	(0.167)	(0.101)	(0.198)	(0.207)	(0.259)

/cut3	-1.138***	-1.026***	-1.135***	-1.232***	-1.263***	-0.807***	-0.785***	-0.862***
	(0.0537)	(0.136)	(0.141)	(0.166)	(0.0977)	(0.196)	(0.205)	(0.258)
/cut4	-0.663***	-0.550***	-0.650***	-0.748***	-0.888***	-0.466**	-0.433**	-0.509**
	(0.0501)	(0.135)	(0.140)	(0.165)	(0.0909)	(0.194)	(0.203)	(0.256)
/cut5	-0.281***	-0.170	-0.265*	-0.362**	-0.624***	-0.203	-0.162	-0.237
	(0.0487)	(0.134)	(0.139)	(0.164)	(0.0880)	(0.194)	(0.203)	(0.255)
/cut6	0.0273	0.140	0.0498	-0.0470	-0.331***	0.0949	0.145	0.0701
	(0.0484)	(0.134)	(0.139)	(0.164)	(0.0861)	(0.194)	(0.203)	(0.255)
/cut7	0.514***	0.632***	0.550***	0.453***	0.365***	0.804***	0.869***	0.794***
	(0.0491)	(0.135)	(0.139)	(0.164)	(0.0861)	(0.195)	(0.205)	(0.256)
/cut8	0.949***	1.070***	0.991***	0.895***	0.755***	1.200***	1.273***	1.198***
	(0.0520)	(0.136)	(0.140)	(0.165)	(0.0898)	(0.198)	(0.208)	(0.258)
/cut9	1.361***	1.484***	1.411***	1.314***	1.043***	1.471***	1.549***	1.474***
	(0.0581)	(0.139)	(0.143)	(0.167)	(0.0951)	(0.201)	(0.211)	(0.261)
Observations	1,588	1,568	1,568	1,568	514	471	471	471

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

5. Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to assess the relationship between perceived social conflict, objective class positions and stratification beliefs in the highly unequal society of South Africa. To understand the variation of PSC, we included variables that represent the Marxist theory, objective class position, and subjectivist theory that included class imagery, perceived inequality and inequality tolerance. From our results, we make four conclusions. First, there seems to be a strong relationship between objective class positions and PSC among South Africans. So, we accept hypothesis H1 that objective class positions influence PSC in a highly unequal society, supporting the Marxist theory of high inequality, high-class consciousness and conflict perceptions. This reinforces the Marxist view of the relationship between class and class conflict. Since South Africa is struggling with extreme levels of inequality and high social unrest, the class divide between the lower, middle and upper classes significantly drives conflict perceptions. Especially among the lower class, who significantly perceives higher

levels of social conflict. Aligned with Marx, higher inequality would drive the lower class to support redistribution policies and also perceive higher levels of social tension among vertical social groups.

Secondly, the results show that middle-class imagery does not influence PSC and rejects the H2 hypothesis that middle-class imagery dilutes the impact of objective class positions on PSC. These findings are somewhat against international studies and point to the South African society having heterogeneous public perceptions about a middle-class society. One explanation for the insignificance could be that the middle class in South Africa is struggling so much, that believing in such a societal structure does not necessarily lead to lower conflict perceptions. Or it could be that social unrest events are rising so quickly that regardless of people's stratification beliefs, they still perceive higher levels of conflict. Regardless the results show that objective class positions stay relevant even after including the middle-class imagery, meaning objective class positions are not muted by middle-class imageries in South Africa.

Thirdly perceived inequality and inequality tolerance significantly influence PSC. Thus, we accept hypothesis H3 that given the high level of inequality, inequality perceptions and tolerance perceptions are significant determinants of PSC. The results show high perceived inequality leads to lower levels of PSC; high inequality tolerance leads to lower levels of PSC. These results make sense and show the importance of inequality perceptions in the conflict perception model in a highly unequal society. As expected, inequality perceptions play a large role in conflict perception models when the country itself is highly unequal. Finally, we also find the importance of demographic factors like race and gender as determinants of PSC. This is especially significant for previously disadvantaged population groups, like females and Africans, who perceive higher PSC compared to males and Whites. Indicating that in the South African conflict perception model, there is still a lingering effect of apartheid that influences people's view of perceived social conflict as inequality remains as high if not higher than during the discriminating Apartheid regime.

Overall, our study finds that objective class positions have become a stronger determinant of perceived social conflict, while the middle-class imagery hypothesis does not hold. Meaning unlike previous studies where policymakers could also focus to foster middle-class imagery, South Africa is probably beyond that point of the social unrest and inequality threshold and other drivers of conflict perceptions include perceived inequality, inequality tolerance, gender and race. All of these above-mentioned play a vital role in the determination of perceived social conflict among South Africans and since perceptions could drive behaviour, it sheds light on the possible future of social unrest events. From a policymaking perspective, unless urgent and structural transformations are implemented to reduce the growing class divide and take note of inequality perceptions, the country is starring down the barrel of a classic Marxist revolution, which might wipe out the entire class system altogether.

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Appendix

Table A1. Test of reliability and validity

	Bartlett test of sphericity	KMO test	Cronbach alpha
2009	0.000	0.645	0.750
2019	0.000	0.693	0.824

Table A2. Stratification beliefs over time

	2009	2019
Stratification beliefs		
Type A	50.78	31.22
Type B	31.76	27.37
Type C	8.68	25.3
Type D	6.62	11.68
Type E	2.15	4.44

Table A3. OLS regression results

	2009	2019
Middle class	-0.0571 (0.146)	-0.596** (0.286)

Upper class	-0.0530	-0.640**
	(0.166)	(0.317)
Middle class imagery	0.0491	0.272
	(0.239)	(0.361)
Perceived inequality	0.585**	0.908**
	(0.266)	(0.395)
Inequality tolerance	-0.159**	0.0610
	(0.0651)	(0.103)
Female	-0.0350	0.839***
	(0.122)	(0.241)
Coloured	0.0774	-0.350
	(0.160)	(0.337)
Indian/Asian	-1.082***	0.621*
	(0.190)	(0.346)
White	-0.474**	-0.991**
	(0.199)	(0.397)
Age	-0.00493	-0.00849
	(0.00438)	(0.00753)
Urban	-0.0634	0.144
	(0.154)	(0.282)
Constant	5.297***	4.748***
	(0.376)	(0.605)
Observations	1,568	471
R-squared	0.037	0.074

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A4. OLS regressions with PSC index as dependent variable

	2009	2019
Middle class	-0.0302 (0.0507)	-0.220** (0.104)
Upper class	-0.0292 (0.0577)	-0.240** (0.116)
Middle class imagery	0.0177 (0.0833)	0.102 (0.132)
Perceived inequality	0.160* (0.0927)	0.311** (0.144)
Inequality tolerance	-0.0650*** (0.0226)	0.0300 (0.0375)
Female	-0.0122 (0.0425)	0.311*** (0.0880)
Coloured	0.0423 (0.0557)	-0.131 (0.123)
Indian/Asian	-0.359***	0.210*

	(0.0663)	(0.126)
White	-0.174**	-0.357**
	(0.0694)	(0.145)
Age	-0.00147	-0.00324
	(0.00153)	(0.00275)
Urban	-0.0358	0.0658
	(0.0536)	(0.103)
Constant	0.167	-0.169
	(0.131)	(0.221)
Observations	1,568	471
R-squared	0.038	0.073

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
