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“I am Working-Class”:
Subjective Self-Definition as a Missing Measure of
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Abstract
This review provides a critical appraisal of the measurement of students’ social class and socioeconomic status (SES) in the context of widening higher education participation. Most assessments of social class and SES in higher education have focused on objective measurements based on the income, occupation, and education of students’ parents, and they have tended to overlook diversity among students based on factors such as age, ethnicity, indigeneity, and rurality. However, recent research in psychology and sociology has stressed the more subjective and intersectional nature of social class. The authors argue that it is important to consider subjective self-definitions of social class and SES alongside more traditional objective measures. The implications of this dual measurement approach for higher education research are discussed.

Keywords: diversity; first-generation students; intersectionality; self-definition; social class; socioeconomic status
“I am Working-Class”:
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The purpose of this review is to provide a critical appraisal of the measurement of students’ social class and socioeconomic status (SES) in higher education and suggest a more integrative approach that incorporates subjective measures from psychology and sociology alongside the more traditional objective measures of parental education, income, and occupation. We begin by defining social class and SES and explaining the importance of these variables in higher education research. We highlight the limitations of conventional, objective assessments of social class and SES in this area. We then discuss recent advances in psychology and sociology that have demonstrated the utility of more subjective, self-definitional measures. We discuss the advantages of these subjective measures and conclude by calling for an integrative approach that includes both subjective and objective measures of social class and SES.

**Defining Social Class and SES**

Social class and SES are based on an interaction between people’s social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and status. Like other sociostructural variables (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), social class and SES have powerful influences on people’s personality and behavior (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). They predict what clothes people wear, what food they eat, how they talk, their attitudes, values and preferences, and their physical and mental health (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

Although often conflated with one another, social class and SES can be distinguished as separate constructs (e.g., Ostrove & Cole, 2003). SES refers to one’s current social and economic situation and, consequently, it is relatively mutable, especially in countries that provide opportunities for economic advancement. In contrast, social class refers to one’s sociocultural background and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations (Jones & Vagle, 2013). Hence, it is possible for a working-class person to have a relatively high SES while remaining in a stereotypically “blue-collar” occupation. Perhaps because social class is more stable than SES, it is also more likely to be associated with intergroup power and status differences that act as the basis for discrimination and prejudice (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). For example, recent research has found evidence of classism at universities (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009).

**The Importance of Social Class and SES Diversity in Higher Education**

International research in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries has identified social class and SES as key factors in determining participation, performance, and retention in higher education (e.g.,
James, 2008; Maras, 2007). In particular, researchers have found that working-class and low SES students are less likely to obtain good grades, complete their degrees, and feel socially integrated at their university (for meta-analytic evidence, see Robbins, Le, Davis, Lauver, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004; Rubin, 2012a). As Devlin (2013) pointed out, this inequality derives from an interaction between student and university factors. Working-class and low SES students are less familiar than middle-class and high SES students with the established cultural norms of universities (e.g., terminology, styles, ways of speaking, worldviews, the roles of students and staff, etc.). Devlin suggests that students and institutions must work together to bridge this socio-cultural incongruity (see also Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

It is imperative for educational researchers to consider social class and SES in their studies in order to understand the implications of diversity in higher education and imbue their work with societal relevance. As a prominent researcher in this field explained, “we can no longer plan an effective research agenda based on the assumption that our undergraduate student population is made up of White undergraduates from middle or upper-middle class homes” (Pascarella, 2006, p. 512). Consequently, higher education researchers need to use sensitive and valid measures of social class and SES in order to provide relevant information to assist higher education administrators and policy-makers in addressing the challenges faced by working-class and low SES students. Below, we consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of traditional, objective measures of social class and SES that have been used in educational research.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Objective Measures of Social Class**

Most assessments of social class and SES in educational research have focused on objective measurements that are based on income, occupation, education, and material possessions (for reviews, see Rubin, 2012a; Sirin, 2005). For example, students might be asked to estimate their annual household income, report the occupation and education levels of their parents, and/or indicate whether or not they own a computer or laptop. This objective measurement approach is useful because it limits the influence of subjective biases in students’ self-reports. Research based on this objective approach has successfully identified the social class differences in participation, performance, and retention in higher education that we discussed earlier. Based on this research, it is clear that objective differences in income can have a profound effect on the time that students have available for studying and socializing as well as the availability and quality of their study resources (e.g., owning a laptop). In addition, differences in parental education levels have been shown to predict exposure to socio-cultural university norms that help students to navigate university life (Rubin, 2012b; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Hence, it is not our aim to reject this well-
established and fruitful approach to studying social class and SES. Nonetheless, we do feel that it is important to highlight a few key limitations of this objective measurement approach.

First, objective measures of social class and SES need to be benchmarked and interpreted relative to population-based standards, and these can be difficult and controversial to establish. In particular, if social class and/or SES are conceptualized as categorical variables, then decisions about how many categories to include and the cut-off points for these categories are debateable (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 2). Even after agreement is reached on such issues, the resulting standards are limited to specific time-periods and contexts. Hence, objective standards can become quickly out-dated and cannot be generalized outside of the local contexts in which they were developed. Indeed, there are no international conventions for measuring social class or SES.

Second, as a target population in higher education, most undergraduate university students have yet to establish a stable income, occupation, or level of education. Consequently, educational researchers often refer to students' parents as relevant proxies for these variables (for a meta-analytic review, see Rubin, 2012a). However, this relatively indirect approach tells us more about students’ parents than about the students themselves; a problem that is exacerbated for older students. For example, the parental education of an older, mature-aged student is less relevant to their SES than the parental education of a younger, more traditional-aged student. A further problem with this approach is that students often do not know the income, occupation, and/or education of their parents. For example, one study found that 51% of respondents were unable to complete a family income measure (Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008, Study 1). Hence, references to parental income, occupation, and/or education can lead to problems with missing data. Researchers can collect data from students’ parents in order to deal with this problem. However, it may be difficult to recruit students’ parents in some cases, again leading to the problem of missing data.

Third, social class and SES are closely bound to other sociodemographic variables in educational contexts, such as age, ethnicity, indigeneity, and regionality or what Bourdieu (1985, 1987) termed a person’s cultural and social capital or *habitus*. Consequently, a fair assessment of social class and SES requires that they are considered in the context of these co-occurring constructs. For example, although the education or family income of an ethnic minority member might be considered to be “low” relative to a majority population standard, it might also be considered to be “high” relative to the person’s minority group (Adler & Stewart, 2007; Ostrove, Adler, Kupfermann, & Washington, 2000). Objective measures are inherently acontextual, and consequently they overlook this intersectionality and its interpretational implications (Crenshaw, 1994; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).
Finally, although objective measures may provide a useful method for assessing a person’s objective SES, they fail to assess the person’s subjective SES and social class identity. Hence, objective measures may categorize a person as being of medium SES and “middle-class” even though the person perceives himself or herself to be of low SES and “working-class”. Again, this social psychological component of SES and social class must be assessed if we conceptualize these variables as being something more than objective societal demographics (Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

The New Socio-Psychological Approach to Social Class

In contrast to educational research, recent studies in psychology and sociology have employed subjective, self-definitional measures of social class and SES alongside more objective measures (e.g., Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Hamamura, 2012; Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Jetten et al., 2008; Kraus, Côte, & Keltner, 2010; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Kudrna, Furnham, & Swami, 2010; Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011; Ostrove et al., 2000; Ostrove, & Cole, 2003; for a recent review of further social psychological research in this area, see Kraus & Stephens, 2012). For example, social psychologists have asked their participants to categorize themselves according to social class categories such as “working-class” and “upper-class” (Horberg et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2008, Study 2). Other researchers in health and social psychology have used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000; Adler & Stewart, 2007). Here, participants indicate their position on a 10-runged “social ladder” in which higher rungs represent people who have higher social class or SES. The scale comes in two versions. The first measures SES based on the respondents’ perceptions of income, education, and occupational prestige in relation to other people in their country. The second measures social class based on the respondents’ subjective perceptions of social standing in their (subjectively defined) community.

Consistent with this subjective methodology, social psychologists have provided an explicit acknowledgement of the subjective component of social class in their recent definitions. For example, Kraus et al. (2009) explained that “social class comprises both an individual’s material resources and an individual’s perceived rank within the social hierarchy” (p. 992). This dualist perspective on social class fits nicely with Bourdieu’s (1985, 1987) considerations on social class. He proposed that the similar objective conditions, or habitus, in which people from different social classes live, including their differing access to social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, gives rise to subjective identities that embody and reify social classes.

The recent increase in the use of subjective measures of social class and SES in psychology has been noted by the American Psychological Association’s
Task Force on SES, which has recommended that researchers employ both subjective and objective measure of SES in their research (Saegert et al., 2006). In general, however, this recommendation has not been heeded by educational researchers (for a notable exception, see Ostrove & Long, 2007). In the following sections, we consider the utility of this dual conceptualization of social class in educational research. In particular, we focus on the validity, reliability, predictive power, and context-sensitivity of subjective measures of social class and SES. To be clear, we do not claim that subjective measures are generally superior to objective measures. We only aim to highlight the relative strengths of subjective measures on some key dimensions in order to persuade educational researchers to incorporate both subjective and objective measures in their research.

**Are Subjective Measures Valid?**

A common concern about the validity of subjective social class measures is that many people do not know what category of social class they belong to. This concern is unfounded if researchers employ meaningful response categories. For example, a recent nationally-representative USA survey found that more than 98% of respondents were able to self-identify as either “upper class” (2%), “upper-middle class” (15%), “middle class” (49%), “lower-middle class” (25%), or “lower class” (7%; Morin & Motel, 2012; see also Ostrove & Long, 2007).

A further concern is that most people will describe themselves as “middle-class.” Although this was the case in the USA survey (i.e., 89% categorized themselves as either “upper-middle class”, “middle class”, or “lower middle-class”), the expansion of the middle-class category into meaningful subcategories can enhance the discriminatory power of such measures.

A further potential threat to the validity of subjective social class measures is that such measures may be influenced by people’s mood or affect. However, contrary to this possibility, experimentally manipulating mood does not alter people’s ratings of their subjective social class (Kraus, Adler, & Chen, 2013; for a discussion, see Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013). Subjective measures also provide valid assessments of social class and SES if these variables are conceived as social identities that are derived from membership in socially-defined groups (e.g., Jetten et al., 2008; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This subjective conceptualization of social class and SES is consistent with the use of self-definition in classifying the ethnicity or indigeneity of people in a range of other settings, including population censuses and university admission applications. In addition, the use of subjective measures to tap the identity component of social class and SES allows researchers to undertake more sensitive investigations of classism in higher education (Langhout et al., 2009).
Empirical evidence of convergent validity comes from studies that have found positive correlations between subjective and objective measures of social class (e.g., Kraus et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2009; Ostrove et al., 2000; Ostrove & Long, 2007). These moderately-sized correlations indicate that subjective measures assess an important aspect of social class but one that is relatively distinct from objective aspects. Consistent with this assumption, subjective measures have been shown to uniquely predict self-rated global health even after controlling for objective measures (Adler et al., 2000). Indeed, this approach of controlling for the objective aspect of social class and SES in order to examine the independent effects of subjective social class can more accurately capture the unique aspects of social class that are not captured by objective indicators.

Are Subjective Measures Reliable and Predictive?

There are reasons to believe that subjective measures of social class provide more reliable and predictive assessments than objective measures, especially in educational research. Subjective measures relate to students rather than to their parents, and so they provide more proximal and accurate representations of students' social class. Consequently, they are likely to be more sensitive to changes in students' social class over time. It is perhaps for these reasons that subjective measures are stronger predictors than objective measures in the field of higher education (Ostrove & Long, 2007) and act as better predictors of health outcomes (e.g., Ostrove et al., 2000; for brief reviews, see Kraus et al., 2009, p. 993; Kudrna et al., 2010, p. 860).

Are Subjective Measures Context-Sensitive?

As we have argued above, social class and SES need to be considered within the context of the broader social, economic and political context (Jones & Vagle, 2013). Subjective measures are better placed to accomplish this goal than objective measures because they have an intrinsic capacity to assess social class in a contextualized manner. Unlike objective measures, subjective measures do not require pre-established benchmarks against which to interpret different levels of social class or SES (e.g., cut-offs for family income). Instead, respondents are able to reflect on their own internalized standards based on their individual, context-specific experiences and reference groups. This does not mean that the interpretation of subjective measures can be undertaken independently from the local contexts and time periods within which they are employed. On the contrary, all measures of social class must be interpreted in a contextual manner. However, the inbuilt context-sensitivity of subjective measures does provide a greater potential for comparisons between different groups, situations, contexts, and cultures (e.g., Hamamura, 2012). In particular, researchers can manipulate the frame of reference within which respondents make their judgments in order to
facilitate relevant comparisons. For example, participants can be instructed to consider their social class or SES relative to others in their country or others in their university (cf. Adler & Stewart, 2007; Kraus et al., 2009). Similarly, comparisons can be made between the subjective family income (e.g., “low”, “medium”, “high”) of traditional- and nontraditional-aged students who are asked to make their judgments in the context of “other students of your age.” Unlike objective measures, this contextual flexibility of subjective measures allows them to accommodate the intersection of social class and SES with other demographics such as gender, age, ethnicity, and regionality (Crenshaw, 1994; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

Implications and Conclusions
Worldwide, universities are striving to provide a curriculum and student services that support expanding and diverse participation and the needs of a 21st century knowledge economy. In order to maintain its relevance, the educational research community needs to provide robust and informative research that accurately defines, describes, and communicates the increasingly diverse demography, experiences, and outcomes of university students. In this review, we have argued that students’ subjectively self-defined perceptions of their social class and SES are vital ingredients in this type of research. Specifically, we have argued that, relative to objective measures, subjective measures of social class and SES:

- provide more direct assessments that relate to students’ self-definition rather than the characteristics of students’ parents;
- can be interpreted without reference to objective standards that are constrained to particular contexts and time-periods;
- result in less missing data;
- are more sensitive to changes in social class and SES;
- assess the identity component of social class and SES;
- have proven convergent validity with objective measures;
- are stronger predictors of some outcome variables;
- afford greater potential for comparisons between different situations and contexts; and
- enable a conceptualization of social class as an intersectional construct.

Again, to be clear, we are not proposing that subjective measures of social class and SES should replace objective measures. Instead, we are suggesting that researchers in higher education should habitually supplement their objective measures with subjective measures in order to provide a more nuanced, articulated, and comprehensive assessment of these complex, context-dependent variables. More generally, this approach will give a clearer voice to students’ subjective experiences in higher education.
References


