



# How do we assign ourselves social status? A cross-cultural test of the cognitive averaging principle



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## ABSTRACT

Subjective social status (SSS), or one's perceived social standing, is linked robustly to mental and physical health and is thought to be determined in part by a cognitive average of one's past, present and expected socioeconomic status. However, this averaging principle awaits a formal test. Further, cultures differ with regard to how they perceive and discount time. In this study, I draw upon cross-sectional data from the United States and Japan (2005 MIDUS non-Hispanic whites and 2008 MIDJA), which measured subjective status in terms of one's perceived standing within a personally defined community. I compare equal and unequal cognitive averaging models for their goodness of fit relative to a traditional present-based model. Socioeconomic status is assessed broadly, in terms of past, present and expected overall work and financial situations. In the United States, averaging models do not fit the data consistently better than a present-based model of SSS. However, in Japan, averaging models do fit SSS consistently better. These fit conclusions are robust to controlling for negative affect.

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## 1. Introduction

Socioeconomic status is a multifaceted, complex assortment of resources that is linked to health outcomes including illness, disability and premature death (Link and Phelan, 1995; Schnittker and McLeod, 2005). Given this complexity, a basic concern remains that “standard measures may not reflect important and relevant aspects of SES” (Braveman et al., 2005:2885). Accordingly, there is growing interest in alternative measures of social status such as subjective social status (SSS), which is thought to “epitomize life-time achievement” (Demakakos et al., 2008:330) and to capture observed as well as unobserved facets of socioeconomic resources. SSS correlates strongly with an assortment of physical and mental health indicators including depression, self-rated health, chronic illness, hypertension, and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol, and it also predicts dietary and exercise habits (Adler et al., 2008; Demakakos et al., 2008; Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006; Ghaed and Gallo, 2007; Hu et al., 2005). Furthermore, correlations between SSS and a wide variety of health indicators usually persist when controls for traditional SES (e.g., education, income, occupation) are introduced and SSS sometimes even predicts health outcomes more robustly or strongly than traditional SES (Adler et al., 2008; Singh-Manoux et al., 2005). Unobserved facets not captured by traditional SES measures may include neighborhoods, educational experiences, meaningful social affiliations, job security and instability, career history and so forth. Further, subjective social

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status may capture one's *relative* standing in a personally relevant community, which in the end may be more decisive and relevant to well-being than any objective SES measure (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006).

While subjective social status may be especially relevant to understanding health disparities relative to traditional SES measures, it remains “seldom available and rarely studied” in studies of population health (Pampel et al., 2010:351). As SSS becomes more widely used in population health research, it will be valuable to know how individuals subjectively determine their own status. This will be important to understanding the underlying nature of health disparities linked to socioeconomic status (Schnittker and McLeod, 2005; Reitzel et al., 2010). According to the “cognitive averaging” principle, one's SSS is thought to be a general self-assessment that derives from some average of one's socioeconomic facets (e.g., Hu et al., 2005; Nobles et al., 2013; Singh-Manoux et al., 2005). In some specific formulations, cognitive averaging also is proposed to be an average of one's past, present and expected socioeconomic status (see Nobles et al., 2013:65; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003, 2005). Put another way, SSS is thought to be informed not simply by one's present resources, but rather by one's resource trajectory, though the relative importance of each time point for SSS assignment remains unclear (Netuveli and Bartley, 2012:1213; Schnittker and Bacak, 2013; Singh-Manoux et al., 2005:860; Wolff et al., 2010:2027).

The cognitive averaging principle, as it pertains to socioeconomic resources across time, awaits a formal test. To offer a test of its fit to variation in SSS, this study compares three alternative models of SSS. Two models represent equally and unequally weighted forms of cognitive averaging of socioeconomic variables across time; these models are compared against a model based solely in one's present socioeconomic status. An arithmetic averaging (“equal averaging”) model assumes equal weights given to the past, present and future. Alternatively, an “unequal averaging” model corresponds to a cognitive mechanism in which, for example, present resources are most important to one's perceived status. Unequal averaging is consistent with social–psychological and economic perspectives stating that the past, present and future carry differing degrees of value, utility or salience (e.g., Chen, 2013; Gilbert and Wilson, 2009; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). It also is consistent with the general notion that individuals value current labor income in the broader context of their assets, wealth, and expected lifetime income (Wang, 2003).

A separate but related issue is that SSS has been used as a status measure in diverse nations and among immigrants (e.g., Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006; Goldman et al., 2006; Hu et al., 2005; Ishida, 2009; Kan et al., 2014; Leu et al., 2008; Nobles et al., 2013), and yet the averaging principle may operate differently across cultural contexts. For instance, cross-cultural research has found that Western and Eastern nations differ in their perceptions of time and in how they assign value to the past, present and future (Becker and Mulligan, 1997; Chen, 2013). Here I compare the three alternative models of SSS using data collected in the United States and in Japan. In 1985–2010, the United States and Japan offered one of the starkest contrasts in savings rates among industrialized Western nations, with the US savings rate equaling only about one-half of the Japan savings rate (Chen, 2013:715), which suggests these two nations differ substantially in how they cognitively assess present financial resources. Thus this comparison provides basic insight into how SSS is appraised by individuals vis-à-vis time while also testing the generalizability of this cognitive mechanism across disparate national cultures.

### 1.1. *Social-psychological mechanisms of subjective social status*

One's socioeconomic resources are assigned subjective value – and one assigns oneself a certain level of social status – according to social–psychological mechanisms. For instance, the SSS assignment process has been found to vary remarkably across racial and ethnic groups, likely due to differing values, historical experiences and levels of acculturation (e.g., Adler et al., 2008; Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006; Goodman et al., 2003; Wolff et al., 2010). Moreover, these studies find that SSS increases in its relevance to health outcomes as reference group size decreases (e.g., an entire nation versus one's community versus one's workplace or school), which implies that “narrow” SSS may more effectively tap social comparison processes. A principle of relative deprivation also has been used to understand how one's objective level of resources matter to one's perceived social standing and thus to health outcomes (Ostrove et al., 2000:617; Kondo et al., 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006).

In addition to these broad social–psychological mechanisms, time-based cognitive mechanisms may operate in the assignment of SSS (Schnittker and McLeod, 2005; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). Adaptive expectations, which have received only limited attention within SSS research, refer to the possibility of self-comparison, such that one's own current socioeconomic status may be valued according to one's own past status (i.e. where one once stood) (Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006:791). This implies a model in which change in one's socioeconomic status across time shapes SSS (and concomitant mental and physical well-being) net of one's starting status (e.g., Burchardt, 2005; Hagerty and Veenhoven, 2003), and is equivalent to a model in which the effect of one's present status is estimated net of one's past status. Other research has shown that previous socioeconomic adversity, in terms of incarceration, continues to influence one's present SSS (Schnittker and Bacak, 2013). More generally, parental socioeconomic status has life-course effects on one's social status and well-being (e.g., Elder et al., 2003; Lareau, 2002; Ross and Mirowsky, 2011).

One's anticipated future resources also shape SSS. Franzini and colleagues (2006) find that trust of others as well as perceived opportunities factor into how one's social status is perceived (see also Ostrove et al., 2000). Trust and opportunity imply a forward-looking orientation to SSS, in which one's present resources are evaluated in the context of whether they are secure or under threat. Indeed, anticipated financial security over the next ten years predicts SSS net of current objective SES and at magnitudes comparable to large gains in current income or wealth (Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). Likewise,

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