



## Clues of subjective social status among young adults <sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

We investigate determinants of subjective social status (SSS) as measured by respondents placing themselves on a ten-rung ladder from least to most “money”, “education” and “respected job”, in a large sample of young adults. The most potent clues of SSS are proximate in the life course, reflecting educational attainment and current socioeconomic and job situation, rather than distal characteristics such as family background, although relatively distal High school GPA has a lingering effect. Additional analyses reveal that College selectivity has a substantial impact on SSS, net of other variables in the model; Currently married does not significantly contribute to SSS, but contrary to some expectations Number of children significantly lowers SSS. We find no evidence of greater “status borrowing” by women as associations of SSS with shared household characteristics (Household income, Household assets, Home ownership) do not differ by gender. Our findings for these young adults support the conclusion of earlier research that SSS reflects a “cognitive averaging” of standard dimensions of socioeconomic status.

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## 1. Introduction

Mainstream social stratification research has favored a structural approach, in which status positions are viewed as forming a pre-existing hierarchy of empty slots, potential occupational roles rooted in the social division of labor and independent to a large extent of the individuals occupying them (Myles, 2003). A recent development is a resurgence of interest in more psychological aspects of social stratification, in particular in subjective evaluations by individuals of their own social status. A principal motivation for this renewed focus on subjective aspects of social position originates in findings of medical sociology that lower socioeconomic status is systematically associated with less favorable health outcomes (Demakakos et al., 2012; Demakakos et al., 2008; Nobles et al., 2013). Research furthermore suggests that at least part of the health-SES association is related to stress due to subjective perception of one's low position in the status hierarchy rather than direct effects on

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health outcomes of adverse material conditions, lack of access to care or unhealthy lifestyles associated with low status. It has been conjectured that the negative psychological effect of low status takes place through physiological pathways involving the adreno-cortical system (Adler and Stewart, 2010; Sapolsky, 2004, 2005). While the health implications of SSS make it of central theoretical and practical importance in the sociology of health, the concept may be of wider theoretical interest in understanding human behavior within an evolutionary perspective by explicitly linking psychosocial aspects of social hierarchies with their biosocial roots in our primate heritage (Lopreato and Crippen, 1999; Mazur, 2005; Sapolsky, 2004, 2005).

In this paper we use data from the Add Health study to investigate clues that young adults use to rate their own socio-economic status on a scale from one to ten. We investigate the impact on subjective social status evaluation of circumstances related to respondent's background, ability, educational outcomes, occupation, and current objective socioeconomic situation. In the next section we review the relevant literature, comparing the mainstream sociological approach to measuring social status with alternative approaches that have emphasized subjective mechanisms of status evaluation. We then present the data and method of analysis. A fourth section presents the results. In the fifth section we discuss the implications of the results for various conceptions of subjective social status that we had found in the literature, including the social reproduction, achievement, independence, sharing, borrowing, permanent status and beautiful family models. We also discuss limitations of the analysis. The last section proposes some broad conclusions of the research.

## 2. Measuring social status

Social status, defined by Nock and Rossi (1979) as “that dimension of social stratification which translates the objective distribution of societal resources into meaningful perceptions of relative desirability (p.1325)”, is a central notion in sociology, and there is a relatively broad consensus on its meaning. In this section we offer a brief review of some principal implementations of the concept of social status leading to the ladder measure of subjective social status that we use in the empirical analysis.

In the mainstream sociological stratification literature going back to the 1930s the conception arose that social status in modern industrial societies is closely linked to a person's occupation, and that a subjective shared evaluation called the “status” or “prestige”, or simply the “goodness” of an occupation can be reliably assessed by aggregating ratings of the occupation by a number of respondents. It was established that these evaluations tend to be stable across social milieus and across societies, even ones at different levels of development (Ganzeboom et al., 1991; Treiman, 1977).

An important discovery was that the prestige of an occupation as rated by respondents could be accurately predicted as a linear function of average education and average earnings of incumbents, with about equal weight of each variable. This relationship allowed the interpolating of prestige scores for all occupations, even those that had not been prestige-rated, as a linear function giving equal weight to occupational education and occupational earnings (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Duncan, 1961; Duncan and Hodge, 1963). This socio-economic indicator (SEI) of the “goodness” of an occupation, and the attendant status conferred on the incumbent, spurred the development of an elaborate field of status-attainment research (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Duncan et al., 1972; Sewell and Hauser, 1975).

In later developments such prestige-validated socioeconomic indexes came to be viewed as unsatisfactory in studies of social mobility. In an influential study Hauser and Warren (1997) argue that composite SEI scales give too much weight to occupational earnings, and thereby downplay the intergenerational association between occupational education of fathers and occupational earnings of sons. The authors suggest that prestige-validated “composite indexes of occupational socioeconomic status are scientifically obsolete”, recommending instead that researchers focus on occupational education, as “[l]evels of occupational education appear to define the main dimension of occupational persistence across and within generations (p.177)”. In practice, later research influenced by Hauser and Warren (1997) critique has tended to include the occupational education and occupational earnings components as separate explanatory variables in regression models, rather than combining them into a composite index (see also Nakao and Treas, 1994; Warren et al., 1998).

Other traditions of research within the sociological literature have emphasized different approaches. A neo-Marxian tradition has emphasized the role of class position, initially implemented as subjective class self-identification (Davis and Robinson, 1988; Hodge and Treiman, 1968; Jackman, 1979; Jackman and Jackman, 1973). For example, Jackman and Jackman (1973) find that respondents identify as: upper class (2.2%), upper middle-class (16.6%), middle class (44%), working class (34.3%), and lower class (2.3%), with a small percentage declining self-identification. Singh-Manoux et al. (2003) point out two vulnerabilities of class self-identification as a measure of subjective social status: respondents may have differing perceptions of the class system, and social class terms may be politically loaded with respondent choices reflecting desirability bias (see also Evans et al., 1992; Kelley and Evans, 1995). Wright (1985) develops a model of class position in capitalist societies based on characteristics of the occupation that emphasizes control of organization assets – reflected in control of budget allocation, supervisory role, and non-routinization of tasks (see also Wright et al., 1982). Wright's approach may be viewed as an attempt to update the Marxian tradition to account for the realities of the social history of industrial societies in the twentieth century, including the emergence (unforeseen by Marx) of a large middle-class – the so-called “embarrassment of the middle class” (Wright, 2008, p.98). Oakes and Rossi (2003) note that Wright's (1985) model is valuable in part because it can be relatively easily implemented in empirical studies (see also Wohlfarth, 1997). We will later assess the relationship of some aspects of Wright's (1985) approach in relation to the ladder measure of subjective social status.

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