

The Psychology of Social Class: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem

Shijing Guo^{1,a,*}

¹*College of Liberal Arts, Oregon State University, 1500 SW Jefferson Way, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA*

a. guoshi@oregonstate.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper reviews research on the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on self-acceptance and self-esteem. It defines self-esteem as an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth. Self-acceptance refers to positively accepting one's self-perceptions and experiences without judgment. Research shows SES is positively associated with self-esteem, likely because higher SES provides more resources to fulfil needs for competence and self-worth. Low SES is linked to lower self-esteem due to greater exposure to stressors and fewer resources to cope. Moreover, self-esteem is positively related to self-acceptance, as believing in one's self-worth facilitates accepting oneself. Furthermore, SES may also directly predict self-acceptance by enabling needs satisfaction. Additionally, self-esteem may mediate the relationship between SES and self-acceptance, such that SES influences self-acceptance through its impact on self-esteem. The paper calls for longitudinal research analyzing the relationships among SES, self-esteem, and self-acceptance across development and diverse populations. It also advocates testing causality through experiments. This research has implications for interventions targeting self-esteem and self-acceptance to improve psychological health.

Keywords: social class, socioeconomic status, self-acceptance, self-esteem

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, income inequality has expanded in most countries worldwide and has gradually become one of the most challenging social issues today [1]. The idea of socioeconomic status (SES) has a long history, originating from early research on social classes in the West. Socioeconomic status refers to an individual's overall situation or status in the social hierarchy, and this concept has been widely applied in various fields such as psychology, sociology, medicine, and economics. Using social stratification theory, Coleman defined socioeconomic status. His theoretical framework mainly studied how social class structures are formed and how people are driven to their current socioeconomic status [2]. SES is a result of "market" capabilities and various forms of resource accumulation. Nevertheless, the study of SES did not receive sufficient attention in its early years, and it is only in recent decades that it has become the focus of psychological research and has made significant progress.

Academia generally divides SES into Objective Socioeconomic Status (OSS) and Subjective Socioeconomic Status (SSS). Specifically, OSS is usually defined as one's social status based on the

social resources obtained, with household income, education level, and occupational status as the primary measurement indicators [3, 4]. SSS refers to one's subjective perception of their relative position in the social hierarchy [5]. The concept of socioeconomic status often appears together with social class and economic inequality. People in higher social classes are usually in economically more affluent environments, having more influential interpersonal networks and more significant business opportunities, which help them increase their social and cultural capital [6].

In contrast, people in lower social classes often face a lack of resources and less influential interpersonal relationships. They may even have to deal with threats from society and the environment, such as discrimination, food insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and low medical coverage [7]. Therefore, differences in socioeconomic status may lead to differences between individuals in resources, behaviours, and cognitions.

Meta-analysis results have found that social class is essential in shaping self-concept [8]. Social class identity is related to one's status in society. It can give individuals high subjective meaning, becoming an essential way to define themselves and others. In other words, social class identity is closely related to self-awareness [9]. At the same time, in social life, comparing various factors with others is an essential premise for individuals to form and develop self-esteem. When comparing with others, the gaps individuals perceive will affect their inner balance. Self-esteem and self-acceptance are essential components of self-awareness, with overlapping concepts. Current research focuses more on the relationships between self-esteem, self-acceptance, and other variables, with less in-depth research on the theoretical positioning and inner relationships between self-esteem and self-acceptance.

In summary, in order to deepen the understanding of how socioeconomic status affects individuals' self-esteem and self-acceptance and promote social fairness and progress, this study intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationships between socioeconomic status, self-acceptance and self-esteem under the theoretical framework of social class psychology, and further elaborate on the mechanism of action between variables.

2. The Definition of Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem

Self-acceptance refers to accepting one's actual cognition and evaluation of oneself, emotionally and attitudinally accepting one's true self [10]. It represents a positive attitude towards all aspects of oneself and is an essential indicator of mental health [11]. The concept was first proposed by the American psychologist G.W. Allport. He believed that self-acceptance means accepting all aspects of oneself, recognizing their positive value, and feeling satisfied with the material, social and spiritual aspects, emphasizing self-cognition and experience. Later researchers believed that self-acceptance is formed based on self-evaluation in self-awareness, involving accepting one's true feelings and experiences. It is a positive psychological attitude that can alleviate psychological problems and is considered an essential criterion for assessing mental health [12].

Self-esteem is a component of self-concept and refers to an individual's overall cognition and evaluation of their worth [13]. It is an emotional experience related to self-worth formed based on self-evaluation and is an essential indicator for assessing mental health [14]. Theoretical and empirical research shows that high self-esteem is associated with positive psychological qualities [15]. Theoretically, self-esteem has been described as an essential internal resource for adolescent mental health [16] because it impacts task success and recognition from others [17,18]. Empirical research finds that higher self-esteem is associated with better mental health among adolescents aged 12 to 23 in different countries [19, 20].

3. The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance and self-esteem are similar in connotation; they are both experiences formed based on self-evaluation and are essential aspects of mental health measurement. However, their conceptual cores are still different [21]. Self-esteem arises after an individual makes an overall self-evaluation. At the same time, self-acceptance, although related to self-evaluation in self-awareness, emphasizes the acceptance of one's cognitions and evaluations, meaning that individuals can accept themselves unconditionally beyond self-evaluation. Unconditional self-acceptance can make it easier for individuals with mental health issues to tolerate and accept their own mistakes, regardless of whether their behaviours are right or recognized by others [22].

Research by clinical and educational practitioners has shown that self-esteem is influenced by many factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, childhood experiences, life events, self-cognition) and can also affect many aspects of mental health (e.g. depression, life satisfaction, self-acceptance). Almost all self-esteem theories believe that self-esteem is closely related to emotions. Individuals with high self-esteem are often associated with optimism, confidence, high self-efficacy, and other psychological and behavioural tendencies [23]. When facing adversity, they often have higher confidence in themselves, believing they can solve problems and buffer the harm and pain that adversity brings [24, 25, 26]. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem are associated with more internalized problems (depression, despair) and externalized problems (suicide) [27, 28, 29, 30, 31]. Self-acceptance is crucial to gaining self-respect and self-fulfilment [32]. Individuals with low self-acceptance who are used to denying themselves will find it difficult to adjust, feel happy, and experience more excellent isolation [33]. Popov's (2019) research found that unconditional self-acceptance predicts mental health better than self-esteem. The higher the unconditional self-acceptance individuals have, the stronger their psychological well-being [34].

On the other hand, self-esteem and self-acceptance can predict each other bidirectionally. Research shows that self-esteem levels and individuals' self-acceptance are significantly positively correlated [34, 35, 36]. Specifically, if an individual has a higher level of self-esteem and believes in their abilities and values, it is easier for them to accept themselves. At the same time, a high level of self-acceptance can also significantly predict high self-esteem levels [21, 37]. However, current research on self-esteem and self-acceptance is primarily cross-sectional. These studies mainly focus on self-esteem and self-acceptance as mediators that buffer or regulate the impacts of adverse life events and childhood trauma on mental health [38, 39, 40]. There is little research exploring the longitudinal relationship between self-esteem and self-acceptance. Whether high self-esteem promotes an individual's self-acceptance or high self-acceptance promotes the formation of high self-esteem remains unknown.

4. The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Self-Esteem

Much empirical research has confirmed the close relationship between socioeconomic status and self-esteem. Research shows that subjective socioeconomic status positively correlates with self-esteem [41]. In a three-year follow-up survey of older people in European countries, subjective socioeconomic status significantly predicted self-esteem [42]. Meta-analysis also shows that socioeconomic status is slightly but significantly correlated with self-esteem. People with higher socioeconomic status have higher self-esteem than those with low SES. This effect increases significantly during adolescence and persists into middle age [43].

5. The mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between socioeconomic status and self-acceptance

Socioeconomic status is closely related to individual mental health. Individuals with lower SES are likely to have negative cognitions and emotions, as they lack adequate material and psychological resources to cope with their environment, which can damage their physical and mental health [44, 45]. At the same time, previous research on SES, self-esteem and positive psychological qualities shows that the higher SES individuals perceive can directly predict their self-esteem, life satisfaction, and self-acceptance. It can also enhance individuals' resilience, life satisfaction, and self-acceptance by mediating self-esteem [46, 47].

Socioeconomic status is closely related to individuals' self-esteem and self-acceptance development. Coopersmith put forward a theory of self-esteem based on research on children's self-esteem development [48]. He believed that the quality of parental education and the material or psychological support they provide are vital for developing individual self-esteem, and such support is more readily available in families with higher socioeconomic status. Individuals from families with higher socioeconomic status are often in a more inclusive environment where needs are easily met, they have more resources for self-development, and they gain more respect from others, making it easier for them to form higher self-evaluations (e.g. high self-esteem and sense of self-worth) and self-acceptance.

In summary, a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between socioeconomic status, self-esteem, and self-acceptance. Specifically, as an important level of needs and a positive psychological factor, satisfying self-esteem can promote an individual's self-acceptance. Socioeconomic status acts as an important factor in achieving and enhancing individual self-esteem, which can promote an individual's life satisfaction and self-acceptance by enhancing their self-esteem.

6. Conclusion

In summary of the literature review, it is known that socioeconomic status can not only directly affect an individual's level of self-acceptance but also indirectly affect it by influencing self-esteem as a mediating variable. This finding provides essential practical guidance for psychological practice. When dealing with individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, psychological practitioners can pay attention to assessing their self-esteem levels and take enhancing self-esteem as an effective way to improve self-acceptance; for individuals with lower self-esteem, methods like enhancing social support and improving coping skills can be used to help build their confidence and gain more positive recognition, thus accepting themselves better. In summary, this study broadens the understanding of how socioeconomic status affects the development of self-awareness and provides the theoretical basis and practical guidance for promoting social equity and mental health.

References

- [1] Alvaredo, F., Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., & Zucman, G. (2017). *Global inequality dynamics: New findings from WID.world*. *American Economic Review*, 107(5), 404–409. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.p20171095>
- [2] Coleman, J. S. (1986). *Social theory, social research, and a theory of action*. *American journal of Sociology*, 91(6), 1309–1335. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228423>
- [3] Boles, D. B. (2011). *Socioeconomic status, a forgotten variable in lateralization development*. *Brain and Cognition*, 76(1), 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandc.2011.03.002>
- [4] Ekehammar, B., Sidanius, J., & Nilsson, I. (1987). *Social status: Construct and external validity*. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 127(5), 473–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1987.9713731>

- [5] Singh-Manoux, A., Adler, N. E., & Marmot, M. G. (2003). Subjective social status: Its determinants and its association with measures of ill-health in the whitehall II study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56(6), 1321–1333. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536\(02\)00131-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536(02)00131-4)
- [6] Akinola, M., & Mendes, W. B. (2014). It's good to be the king: Neurobiological benefits of higher social standing. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(1), 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550613485604>
- [7] Baker, E. H. (2014). Socioeconomic status, definition. *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of health, illness, behavior, and society*, 2210–2214. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118410868.wbehibs395>
- [8] Easterbrook, M. J., Kuppens, T., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2020). Socioeconomic status and the structure of the self-concept. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(1), 66–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12334>
- [9] Fisher, O., O'Donnell, S. C., & Oyserman, D. (2017). Social class and identity-based motivation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 61–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.07.035>
- [10] Chen, S., Liu, J., Zhang, Z., & Li, Z. (2017). Self-acceptance and associated factors among Chinese women with breast cancer. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 26(11-12), 1516–1523. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.13437>
- [11] Xu, W., Zhou, Y., Fu, Z., & Rodriguez, M. (2017). Relationships between dispositional mindfulness, self-acceptance, perceived stress, and psychological symptoms in advanced gastrointestinal cancer patients. *Psycho-Oncology*, 26(12), 2157–2161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.4437>
- [12] Bernard, M. E., Vernon, A., Terjesen, M., & Kurasaki, R. (2013). Self-Acceptance in the education and counseling of young people. *The Strength of Self-Acceptance*, 155–192. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6806-6_10
- [13] Rosenberg, M. (1965). Rosenberg self-esteem scale. *Journal of Religion and Health*.
- [14] Mecca, A. M., Smelser, N. J., & Vasconcellos, J. (1989). *The social importance of self-esteem*. University of California Press. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6c6006v5/>
- [15] Yang, Q., Tian, L., Huebner, E. S., & Zhu, X. (2019). Relations among academic achievement, self-esteem, and subjective well-being in school among elementary school students: a longitudinal mediation model. *School Psychology*, 34(3), 328–340. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000292>
- [16] Avedissian, T., & Alayan, N. (2021). Adolescent well-being: a concept analysis. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 30(2), 357–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12833>
- [17] Harter, S., & Leahy, R. L. (2001). The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 15(4), 383–384. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0889-8391.15.4.383>
- [18] Leary, M. R., Tambor, E. S., Terdal, S. K., & Downs, D. L. (1995). Self-esteem as an interpersonal monitor: The sociometer hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(3), 518–530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.3.518>
- [19] Almquist, Y. B., Östberg, V., Rostila, M., Edling, C., & Rydgren, J. (2013). Friendship network characteristics and psychological well-being in late adolescence: Exploring differences by gender and gender composition. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 42(2), 146–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494813510793>
- [20] Greger, H. K., Myhre, A. K., Klöckner, C. A., & Jozefiak, T. (2017). Childhood maltreatment, psychopathology and well-being: The mediator role of global self-esteem, attachment difficulties and substance use. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 70, 122–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.012>
- [21] MacInnes, D. L. (2006). Self-esteem and self-acceptance: An examination into their relationship and their effect on psychological health. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 13(5), 483–489. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2850.2006.00959.x>
- [22] Ellis, A. (1977). *Psychotherapy and the value of a human being*. In R. Grieger (Ed.), *Handbook of Rational Emotive Therapy* (pp. 99–112). Springer Verlag.
- [23] Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1529-1006.01431>
- [24] Gao, Y., Liang, C., Liu, X., Bai, R., & Xing, S. (2023). Self-esteem buffers the stress sensitizing effect of childhood maltreatment on adolescent nonsuicidal self-injury. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2023.10.117>
- [25] Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., & Schimel, J. (2004). Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(3), 435–468. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.435>
- [26] Shek, D. T. L. (2004). Chinese cultural beliefs about adversity. *Childhood*, 11(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568204040185>
- [27] Cawood, C. D., & Huprich, S. K. (2011). Late adolescent nonsuicidal self-injury: The roles of coping style, self-esteem, and personality pathology. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 25(6), 765–781. <https://doi.org/10.1521/pedi.2011.25.6.765>

- [28] Forrester, R. L., Slater, H., Jomar, K., Mitzman, S., & Taylor, P. J. (2017). *Self-esteem and non-suicidal self-injury in adulthood: a systematic review*. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 221, 172–183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.06.027>
- [29] Jang, J.-M., Park, J.-I., Oh, K.-Y., Lee, K.-H., Kim, M. S., Yoon, M.-S., Ko, S.-H., Cho, H.-C., & Chung, Y.-C. (2014). *Predictors of suicidal ideation in a community sample: Roles of anger, self-esteem, and depression*. *Psychiatry Research*, 216(1), 74–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2013.12.054>
- [30] Overholser, J. C., Adams, D. M., Lehnert, K. L., & Brinkman, D. C. (1995). *Self-Esteem deficits and suicidal tendencies among adolescents*. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34(7), 919–928. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199507000-00016>
- [31] Sharaf, A. Y., Thompson, E. A., & Walsh, E. (2009). *Protective effects of self-esteem and family support on suicide risk behaviors among at-risk adolescents*. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 22(3), 160–168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2009.00194.x>
- [32] Robbins, M. (2007). *Focus on the good stuff: The power of appreciation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [33] Papalia, D. E., Olds, S. W., & Feldman, R. D. (2007). *Human development*. McGraw-Hill.
- [34] Popov, S. (2019). *When is unconditional self-acceptance a better predictor of mental health than self-esteem?* *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 37(3), 251–261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-018-0310-x>
- [35] Cucu-Ciuhan, G., & Dumitru, I. (2017). *Unconditional self-acceptance, functional and dysfunctional negative emotions, and self-esteem as predictors for depression in adolescents: a brief pilot study conducted in romania*. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy*, 20(4). https://jep.ro/images/pdf/cuprins_reviste/80_art_4.pdf
- [36] Zhang, L., & Postiglione, G. A. (2001). *Thinking styles, self-esteem, and socio-economic status*. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 31(8), 1333–1346. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869\(00\)00227-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869(00)00227-0)
- [37] Safarina, N. A., & Maulayani, M. (2021). *Self-acceptance as a predictor of self-esteem in victims of body shaming*. *INSPIRA: Indonesian Journal of Psychological Research*, 2(1), 5–11. <https://doi.org/10.32505/inspira.v2i1.2946>
- [38] Kong, L., Gao, Z., Xu, N., Shao, S., Ma, H., He, Q., Zhang, D., Xu, H., & Qu, H. (2021). *The relation between self-stigma and loneliness in visually impaired college students: Self-acceptance as mediator*. *Disability and Health Journal*, 14(2), 101054. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.101054>
- [39] Sanghvi, D., Zainal, N. H., & Newman, M. G. (2023). *Trait self-acceptance mediates parental childhood abuse predicting depression and anxiety symptoms in adulthood*. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 94, 102673. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2023.102673>
- [40] Su, H., Wang, L., Li, Y., Yu, H., & Zhang, J. (2019). *The mediating and moderating roles of self-acceptance and self-reported health in the relationship between self-worth and subjective well-being among elderly chinese rural empty-nester*. *Medicine*, 98(28), e16149. <https://doi.org/10.1097/md.00000000000016149>
- [41] Leung, S. O., & Xu, M. L. (2013). *Single-Item measures for subjective academic performance, self-esteem, and socioeconomic status*. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39(4), 511–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2013.794757>
- [42] Lundberg, J., & Kristenson, M. (2008). *Is subjective status influenced by psychosocial factors?* *Social Indicators Research*, 89(3), 375–390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-008-9238-3>
- [43] Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2002). *Self-Esteem and socioeconomic status: a meta-analytic review*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 6(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0601_3
- [44] Gallo, L. C., Bogart, L. M., Vranceanu, A.-M., & Matthews, K. A. (2005). *Socioeconomic status, resources, psychological experiences, and emotional responses: a test of the reserve capacity model*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(2), 386–399. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.2.386>
- [45] Gallo, L. C., & Matthews, K. A. (2003). *Understanding the association between socioeconomic status and physical health: Do negative emotions play a role?* *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(1), 10–51. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.1.10>
- [46] Prabhu, S. G., & Shekhar, R. (2017). *The role of socio-economic status in adolescent resilience and self-esteem*. *Indian Journal of Health and Well-Being*, 8(9), 985–989. http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal_detail/19#list
- [47] Yan, W., Zhang, L., Li, W., & Kong, F. (2022). *How is subjective family socioeconomic status related to life satisfaction in chinese adolescents? The mediating role of resilience, self-esteem and Hope*. *Child Indicators Research*, 15(5), 1565–1581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09936-2>
- [48] Coopersmith, S. (1981). *Coopersmith self-esteem inventories*. *PsycTESTS Dataset*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t06456-000>