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Status-Based Identity: A Conceptual Approach Integrating the Social Psychological Study of Socioeconomic Status and Identity

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Abstract

Psychological research on socioeconomic status (SES) has grown significantly over the past decade. In this article, we build upon and integrate existing approaches to direct greater attention toward investigating the subjective meaning and value that people attach to understanding their own SES as an identity. We use the term *status-based identity* to organize relevant research and examine how people understand and make meaning of their SES from moment to moment in real time. Drawing from multiple areas of research on identity, we suggest that even temporary shifts in how people construe their status-based identities predict changes in thought, affect, motivation, and behavior. This novel focus is positioned to examine the psychological effects of status transitions (e.g., upward or downward mobility). Further, in initial empirical work, we introduce a new measure to assess uncertainty regarding one's SES (i.e., status-based identity uncertainty) and offer evidence that greater uncertainty regarding one's status-based identity is associated with lower individual well-being. In sum, we argue that insight from the literature on identity will both expand and serve to organize the burgeoning literature on the psychology of SES and, in so doing, reveal promising new directions for research.

Keywords

socioeconomic status, identity, intrapersonal processes/self, social mobility

During the past 5–10 years, social psychological research on socioeconomic status (SES) and social class has expanded notably. As a result, a growing number of theoretical perspectives and psychological measures can be used to understand how people's income, financial assets, educational attainment, occupational prestige, or perception of their own SES influence basic social psychological processes. In other words, existing approaches reveal how socioeconomic differences, whether through access to resources or exposure to sociocultural contexts, shape everyday thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and lifetime experiences (e.g., Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014).

The body of literature accumulated thus far offers a solid foundation to advance the social psychological study of SES. Specifically, a review of existing studies of SES suggests that the research can benefit from an expanded interface with the extant literature regarding identity for two main reasons. First, emerging research indicates an increasing awareness of SES as an important aspect of identity in today's society (e.g., Croizet & Claire, 1998; Destin & Oyserman, 2010; V. Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). As with other aspects of identity, people ascribe meaning and value to understanding their SES, which has

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not yet been the focus of existing social psychological approaches. A person's understanding of their SES can help to create a cohesive life story (i.e., narrative identity, see McAdams & McLean, 2013), establish a sense of belonging and group membership (i.e., social identity, see Spears, 2011), and guide the development of ideas about the future (i.e., future identity, see Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011). As a result, we advance the concept of *status-based identity* in reference to the subjective understanding, meaning, and value that people attach to their SES from moment to moment in real time. The study of status-based identity establishes a more direct and expanded connection between research on SES and research on identity.

Second, and relatedly, many theoretical perspectives acknowledge that an individual's SES is malleable such that it can change throughout life and even feel different based on situational circumstances (e.g., Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, & Payne, 2015; John-Henderson, Rheinschmidt, Mendoza-Denton, & Francis, 2014; Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). However, existing social psychological approaches to SES have not drawn specific attention to subjective changes to identity that can occur as a result of status change. If a clear sense of one's status-based identity indeed carries the functions and benefits described above, and the subjective understanding and meaning of one's status may come into question during experiences of mobility, then important unexplored psychological and behavioral consequences are likely to follow. Thus, we propose the conceptualization of *status-based identity uncertainty* in order to quantify the extent to which people have a strong and stable (vs. weak and unstable) understanding of their SES with potential implications for well-being and other important life outcomes.

In this article, we first briefly review existing social psychological approaches to SES that provide the foundation for our viewpoint. These approaches nicely illustrate how different levels of SES accompany different social and psychological tendencies and associated outcomes (i.e., the social cognitive approach) or highlight the role of sociocultural factors in explaining the experiences of members of different social classes (i.e., the cultural approach). Next, we offer a viewpoint that builds upon these existing approaches to further integrate the study of SES with advances from research on identity. Specifically, we present research supporting the ideas that (a) SES is an important and meaningful aspect of the self (i.e., status-based identity) and (b) an individual's level of certainty or uncertainty regarding their SES (i.e., status-based identity uncertainty) has implications for a range of significant life outcomes. We draw particular attention to the potential psychological consequences of upward or downward social mobility and major life transitions (e.g., high school or college graduation) that the study of status-based identity is well-suited to address. Finally, we suggest new directions for research that stem from a viewpoint that directs greater attention toward the connection between SES and identity.

Social Psychological Approaches to SES

First, it is important to consider how SES is measured and conceptualized in psychology and related fields. Status, in general, captures an individual's standing on any dimension along a hierarchy (Fiske, 2010b, 2011). We concentrate our viewpoint specifically on SES because status is inherently understood and accepted as an inextricable part of the definition of SES, and in comparison with other dominant identity dimensions that also inform societal status hierarchies (e.g., race, gender), SES is more often perceived to be malleable and expected to change across the life course. The American Psychological Association defines SES as "the social standing or class of an individual . . . often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation" (APA, 2016). Measures of SES tend to capture objective and subjective facets of SES (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013; Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Whereas objective SES is based on one's access to resources (e.g., income, educational attainment, and/or occupational prestige), subjective SES is based on one's perceived social standing relative to others (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). Both of these facets of SES contribute to people's lived experiences of being from a certain SES background, and they consistently predict important life outcomes. For example, students from higher income families are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than are students from lower income families (e.g., Carnevale & Rose, 2003). In addition, SES influences cognitive development (Hackman et al., 2014; Hackman & Farah, 2009; Hackman, Farah, & Meaney, 2010) and exerts a gradient effect on health, such that children and adults at every increased level of SES experience better physical health, on average, which is potentially due to a combination of reduced exposure to stressors and differences in health behaviors (e.g., Chen, 2004; Matthews & Gallo, 2011). Building upon this research, we argue that the construct of status-based identity will facilitate a deeper understanding of how people make meaning of their SES and the corresponding implications of transitions from one SES category to another.

Existing social psychological research largely conceptualizes SES, whether objective or subjective, through one of two main approaches, both of which have contributed to significant gains in the understanding of how SES matters in people's lives: the social cognitive approach and the cultural approach.

The social cognitive approach emerged in social psychology to illustrate how SES can affect basic psychological tendencies. For example, lower SES is associated with greater attention to external forces; more contextual explanations of social events; and more generous, prosocial behaviors. On the other hand, higher SES is associated with greater attention to internal factors, dispositional explanations of social events, and fewer prosocial behaviors (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2010). Studies explain these differences in part by a greater sense of control among high-SES individuals and a greater sense of compassion among low-SES individuals. Related research on power similarly demonstrates that when people are put into positions of higher relative power, they adopt more egocentric perspectives and are less likely to be affected by the influence of others than do those who are put into positions of lower relative power (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). In regard to the study of SES, these perspectives illustrate how having greater financial resources can lead people to interact with the world in ways that are systematically different than having relatively fewer financial resources.

The cultural approach to SES, not surprisingly, draws upon decades of research on cultural psychology, wherein culture is defined as an evolving and somewhat amorphous combination of "ideas, practices, institutions, products, and artifacts" that influence behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 2010, p. 422). SES is, therefore, inherently related to culture because the institutions (e.g., schools), contexts (e.g., neighborhoods), and circumstances (e.g., financial resources) that largely correlate with, if not define, a person's SES also shape and are shaped by multiple intersecting aspects of an individual's broader culture. Individuals' experiences of SES take place within particular sociocultural contexts that, in turn, influence how they view and interact with the world. Interactions with complex sociocultural contexts continually develop and reshape every person's dynamic sense of who they are as a whole (i.e., sociocultural self; see Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Research from the cultural approach might reach similar conclusions as research from the social cognitive approach, but it draws attention to specific cultural factors to explain the effects of SES on sociocultural selves, psychological characteristics, and life outcomes (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). In other words, cultural psychology has informed the study of SES by describing how experiences in different socioeconomic contexts (e.g., low- vs. high-SES schools, neighborhoods, workplaces) over time shape people's cultural-specific selves in ways that influence the dynamic interaction between context, self, and behavior.

According to the cultural approach, one important reason that SES affects psychological tendencies and life outcomes is that experiences in socioeconomic contexts over time continually influence a person's predilection toward various forms of independent and interdependent self-construals (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Whereas lower SES American contexts and communities tend to prioritize interdependence (i.e., concern for others and adaptability), higher SES American contexts and communities tend to prioritize independence (i.e., freedom of thought and behavior; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). So similar to the social cognitive approach, the cultural approach illustrates that people with ample resources and higher SES prioritize their personal goals and interests in general, whereas those with fewer resources and lower SES tend to place greater value on the people around them and their surroundings (Kraus et al., 2012). The cultural approach, then, adds a rich theoretical framework through which to understand and explain these cognitive and behavioral tendencies that appear to be associated with SES and can be elicited with cultural cues.

The cultural approach to SES also investigates the consequences that occur when people cross social class boundaries and experience a "cultural mismatch," which might initiate processes that reshape or reinforce their sense of self. In particular, when students from lower and working class family backgrounds enter into predominantly middle and upper class college contexts, they are likely to encounter certain sociocultural adjustment difficulties (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). The contrast between their former cultural context (characterized by relatively greater emphasis on interdependence) and current cultural contexts (characterized by relatively greater emphasis on independence) is likely to accompany unfamiliar norms and values, which can lead to psychophysiological stress and impair academic performance (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

An Emphasis on Status-Based Identity Builds From Existing Approaches

We present the idea of status-based identity not as an alternative to existing approaches but as a way to build upon the existing foundation of research and integrate their findings in order to more fully capture the subjective understanding, meaning, and value that people ascribe to their SES. Existing approaches are well-suited to explain how SES affects life outcomes, psychological tendencies, and even broader constructions of the sociocultural self, but they do not focus directly on understanding an individual's construal of their own SES, including how this subjective construal may change in real time from moment to moment or over time as a

result of socioeconomic mobility. The cultural approach provides an appropriate starting point through its explanation of how people's broader sociocultural selves evolve in interaction with context over time, especially in terms of the implications for the overarching manifestations of independence and interdependence. That is, the cultural approach illustrates how broad dimensions of the self (e.g., independence and interdependence) are continually cued, shaped, and reshaped by socioeconomic contexts. The concept of status-based identity draws attention to a specific and unexplored aspect of the broader self: how individuals make sense of their fluid and changing SES. As described by Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2012), the self includes many different identities. We situate status-based identity within the broader sociocultural self, providing a novel conceptual viewpoint and empirical tools to study SES as a specific, subjective identity. Therefore, status-based identity is influenced by the same range of considerations emphasized by existing approaches, including independence and interdependence; however, it allows for an investigation of novel mechanisms regarding the subjective understanding and meaning that people attach to their own SES.

Some psychological methods of studying SES have already begun to evolve in order to offer a better account for how people perceive and make meaning of their status. As described previously, the construct of subjective SES, and the "ladder" measure in particular, allow participants to indicate where they rank themselves on a social hierarchy (Adler et al., 2000). Although subjective SES captures a person's subjective rank, it does not capture the sense of meaning, value, or stability that an individual attaches to his or her SES. This method has been expanded somewhat in assessments of perceived social mobility by asking people to compare their projected SES to their current SES (Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Ritterman Weintraub, Fernald, Adler, Bertozzi, & Syme, 2015). Other research has investigated the relationship between college students' expectations of mobility and their beliefs about the causes of mobility (Shane & Heckhausen, 2013). Further, longitudinal approaches have followed the evolution of people's subjective SES ratings over time (Janicki-Deverts, Cohen, Matthews, Jacobs, & Adler, 2011). Recent studies have also investigated the consequences of the extent to which people believe that social class differences represent stable, deep-rooted biological differences (Kraus & Keltner, 2013; Tan & Kraus, 2015). Finally, a recent qualitative study investigated how changes in SES can lead to a perceived conflict between a person's prior and current sense of self (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). We propose that an approach centered on the concept of status-based identity is poised to guide, foster, and expand this emerging investigation of people's fluid understandings of their own SES. We do so by investigating how status-based identity resembles aspects of other identities in its structure, function, and potential implications for thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and outcomes.

Drawing From Untapped Research on Identity to Expand the Study of SES

Insight from the ever-growing study of identity provides guidance toward a more complete understanding of the self-reflective aspects of status-based identity. We draw specifically from research regarding narrative identity, social identity, and future identity in order to guide the investigation of status-based identity.

Narrative identity

First, *narrative identity* refers to the stories that people tell of how their lives have unfolded over time in order to make sense of themselves and their place in the world (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Studies of narrative identity describe findings from standardized interview methods revealing a number of recurring themes that emerge as people recount the stories of their lives. For example, as one part of the life story interview method, participants describe a turning point or "a scene in which the participant experienced a significant life change" (McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p. 12). These scenes often reveal themes of redemption, which illustrate how a person's initial potential is confronted by some sort of external challenge or obstacle that they eventually are able to overcome in order to reach a state of personal growth (McAdams, 2006; Rotella, Richeson, & McAdams, 2015). Redemptive themes and many other examples of personal stories illustrate that narrative identity is necessarily malleable and evolving in reaction to changing circumstances. As people move throughout the world, their sense of self, as captured by narrative identity, is fluid, reactive, and sensitive to changes in SES.

Narrative identity can be used to reinterpret past experiences and to help find meaning from changing socioeconomic circumstances. For example, Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) analyzed narratives of individuals who experienced social mobility.

> It appalls me to think what an immense transformation I had to work on myself in order to become what I have become: if I had known what I was doing I would surely not have been able to do it, I would surely not have wanted to. No wonder the choice had to be blind; there was a kind of treason in it: treason toward my family, treason toward my friends.

> In choosing the road I choose, I was pronouncing a judgment on them, and the fact that they concurred in the judgment makes the whole thing sadder but no less cruel. (Podhoretz, 1967, pp. 3–4)

An approach that incorporates narrative identity sheds important insight into how people reevaluate their past socioeconomic circumstances to tell a more complete and evolving story of their current status-based identity. However, in analyzing the rich and multifaceted narratives like the one above, it becomes clear that the social groups that a person belongs to are also central to understanding and finding meaning in one's SES. Thus, we turn to *social identity* as another contributor to status-based identity.

Social identity

A vast literature has investigated social group memberships as meaningful and influential aspects of identity. Even the earliest studies of social identity theory emphasized a human tendency to quickly form and join groups based on almost arbitrary distinctions between individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Continuing research on social identity has shown that these group memberships influence behaviors, and people are likely to act in ways that feel aligned with the perceived positive and/or negative attributes of their group as a whole (for a review, see Spears, 2011). Indeed, some studies of social class identity have begun to measure the meaning and value that people ascribe to their SES (e.g., Aries & Seider, 2007; V. Thomas & Azmitia, 2014).

Of course, people have many social identities, and the relative salience of any particular social identity, in addition to the behavioral consequences of activating any particular social identity, will vary according to the context. In one notable example, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) observed that the performance of Asian American women on a math task depended on which social identity was made salient before engaging in the task. If their Asian American identity was salient (stereotyped as strong in math), they performed better on the task than if their female identity was salient (stereotyped as weak in math). Similarly, feelings of membership or belonging to a particular socioeconomic group or a group that is strongly associated with a particular SES (e.g., sheet metal workers) can also shift from moment to moment in perceptible ways that can be captured in real time. Vice President Joe Biden provides a vivid example of how a high-SES individual can strategically and systematically shift to a lower SES social identity. At a campaign event in 2012, Biden invoked the memory of his father's employment loss and connected with the manufacturing sector audience during his prepared remarks.

> Those are the days when the longest walk that these folks were taking wasn't from the factory floor to the parking lot for the last time, it was up that flight of stairs they had to go up once they got home into their child's bedroom . . . My dad made that walk when I was young. An awful lot of kids heard the same words I heard, except the difference between then and now was that my father said everything was going to be okay. (The White House, 2012)

Future identity

In addition to narrative identity and social identity, another area of identity research that contributes to our development of the concept of status-based identity is *future identity*. Future identity refers to how an individual imagines their own future (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Strahan & Wilson, 2006), which includes both positive and negative images of possible futures (or possible selves), as well as the associated strategies to reach or avoid those possible futures (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As people consider the futures that they would like to reach or avoid, they often bring to mind information that is directly relevant to SES, such as finishing college or avoiding unemployment.

Importantly, future identities are cued within contexts, and different types of contexts activate different types of positive and negative future identities. For example, Oyserman et al. (2011) analyzed the open-ended responses of 284 eighth-grade students to a possible selves prompt that asked participants what they expected to be like and to be doing next year in addition to whether they were currently working on each goal. Adolescents in low-SES neighborhoods were equally likely to imagine futures that included academic success as adolescents in high-SES neighborhoods, however those in high-SES neighborhoods were more likely than those in low-SES neighborhoods to visualize the detailed path and strategies required to reach a successful future identity. Similarly, Shah and colleagues have illustrated that living under scarce financial resource influences cognition in a way that leads people to attend more to immediate needs than long-term planning (Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012; Shah, Shafir, & Mullainathan, 2015).

At the same time, future identities are malleable. In field experiments, when low-SES middle school students were randomly assigned to receive information about need-based financial aid, which makes a pathway to college seem more clear and attainable, they were more likely to express a future identity that realistically included educational success and also more likely to exert greater effort in school in service of reaching that future identity than were students in control groups (Destin, 2013, 2016;

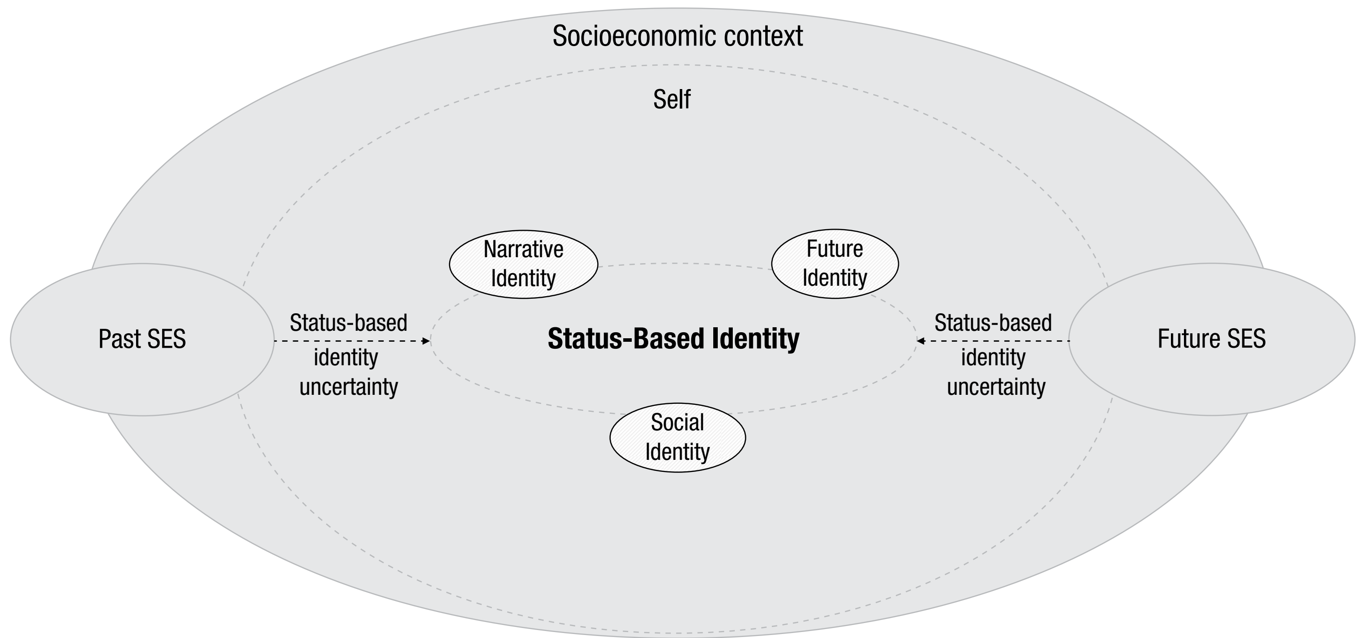

Fig. 1. Key components contributing to the dynamic construction of status-based identity, which is situated within the broader sociocultural self and subject to status-based identity uncertainty.

Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Thus, a person's future identity is malleable and informs the understanding of one's own evolving SES (e.g., future college graduate). Future identity, therefore, adds another important layer of complexity to status-based identity.

Overall, by incorporating aspects of narrative identity, social identity, and future identity, researchers will be better equipped to investigate SES as a meaningful and valued identity and uncover the dimensions of that identity that have implications for important life outcomes like academic achievement, close relationships, financial decision making, and general well-being. As illustrated in Figure 1 and described previously, we argue that the concept of status-based identity is situated within the broader self, and our viewpoint builds upon existing models of the sociocultural self. Status-based identity, however, provides a novel focus on an individual's current construal of their own SES, incorporating relevant elements of their narrative identity, social identity, and future identity. For example, one person's status-based identity could include a combination of (a) a narrative of growing up in a working class single-income family and finding financial success in the entertainment industry, (b) a social network of wealthy and powerful friends and high-profile celebrity relationships, and (c) an imagined future that includes greater critical recognition and respect as an actor. Status-based identity captures the way that people make sense of all of these factors from moment to moment, guiding people's self-perceptions, affect, and choices in their daily lives. So, unlike traditional SES, in which higher status is often associated with different outcomes than lower status, the outcomes and processes associated with status-based identity can vary among individuals with similarly high or low subjective or objective SES.

In addition to a novel focus on the subjective construal, meaning, and value that people attach to their current SES, the approach includes clear predictions regarding how status change affects people's psychological processes. As shown in Figure 1, status-based identity is a specific component of the broader self that is dynamically influenced by the surrounding socioeconomic context. The components of a person's status-based identity draw from their past, current, and future SES. For example, narrative identity connects past and current SES, social identity reinforces SES-relevant group memberships in the moment and across time, and future identity reflects ideas about one's SES trajectory. As people move away from a past SES or toward a future SES, however, we predict that they are likely to experience status-based identity uncertainty (as depicted by arrows in Fig. 1) with potential implications for their affect, motivation, behavior, and well-being. Keeping with the previous example, a person would experience status-based identity uncertainty during the process of moving away from his low-SES background and becoming established in the entertainment industry. The same person would also experience status-based identity uncertainty after releasing a poorly rated movie, perhaps calling into question future financial success and

belonging among the wealthy elite. Thus, status-based identity provides a viewpoint that can integrate a growing number of studies on the effects of status change that are otherwise disconnected from one another.

The Emerging Study of Status Change

One area of research that has been transformed by the consideration of status change is the study of SES and health. Research using stable measures of SES has traditionally found a negative relationship between SES and numerous health vulnerabilities (Adler et al., 1994); however, recent research on the relationship between status changes and health outcomes has yielded mixed findings. Some researchers have found that downward mobility predicts health risks (e.g., Alcántara, Chen, & Alegría, 2014; Collins, Rankin, & David, 2015) and upward mobility predicts health benefits (e.g., Gruenewald et al., 2012). On the other hand, other research finds no effects of status change on health (Ashford, 1990). Last, in some studies, any direction of status change (i.e., upward or downward) predicts elevated mortality risk (Lee & Huang, 2015), and upward mobility can yield unique physical and mental health risks, especially among individuals from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Hudson, 2015; Miller, Yu, Chen, & Brody, 2015).

The mixed effects regarding social mobility have been explained through a number of potential mechanisms. For instance, people who experience mobility may also experience a decrease in connection to their SES of origin (i.e., their background community) and, perhaps also, in the social support of family, friends, and community members that is integral to psychological well-being (Cohen, 2004; Diener, 2012; Hudson, 2015; Van Laar, Bleeker, Ellemers, & Meijer, 2014). People who become associated with a high-SES context (e.g., low-SES student at an elite college) may even become stereotyped as “cold” or “spoiled” (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) by individuals from their former communities. At the same time, upwardly mobile individuals may not feel like they fit into their new communities. Experiences of social isolation and discrimination are especially common among people from lower income and racial–ethnic minority backgrounds who are pursuing social mobility through higher education (Cole & Omari, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Rheinschmidt & Mendoza-Denton, 2014). Last, as described in our discussion of the cultural approach, people may experience a “cultural mismatch” as they move from a context that has been shaped by one set of cultural norms and values into a context that is shaped by a different set of cultural norms and values (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

The concept of status-based identity can help to organize and build upon these and other explanations of the complex relationship between status change and well-being by illuminating an overlooked factor. The summative, yet unmeasured, insight of these approaches suggests that moving into a new socioeconomic context can challenge a person’s understanding of their own SES. Their personal life stories (i.e., narrative identity), ideas of belonging to a social group (i.e., social identity), and expectations of their possible futures (i.e., future identity) start to feel unclear and uncertain during these experiences of mobility. Our viewpoint, which builds upon and integrates social cognitive and cultural approaches, focuses squarely on the role of status-based identity and potential uncertainty regarding this identity, and thus it is equipped to explain how status shifts can engender unanticipated challenges to health, achievement, and well-being.

Status-Based Identity and Self-Concept Clarity

An approach to SES that highlights its elements of narrative, social, and future identities opens the door for a number of novel research directions. Many existing measures of these different aspects of identity can be modified to quantify the understanding, meaning, and value of a person’s subjective experience of SES (i.e., their status-based identity). Further, an emphasis on status-based identity draws attention to mechanisms that can explain how people experience movement through social contexts or life stages that may precipitate an evolved understanding of their own SES. As people’s social contexts change, so too do their narratives, group memberships, and thoughts about their future in relation to their SES, and such change may lead an individual to feel uncertain about their status-based identity.

We draw from studies of self-concept clarity, which suggest that people benefit from a clear sense of who they are and where they belong (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). Students who rate themselves higher in self-concept clarity (e.g., “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”) are more likely to feel committed to their educational goals (Schwartz et al., 2011) and less likely to self-handicap, leading to higher grades for them than for students who are low in self-concept clarity (C. R. Thomas & Gadbois, 2007). People who are high in self-concept clarity also tend to report better relationships (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010) and higher overall well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001) than do those low in self-concept clarity. High self-concept clarity has even been found to protect individuals with

low self-esteem from depressive symptoms (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011).

Existing studies suggest a close yet unexplored connection between the concepts of self-concept clarity and status-based identity. First, self-concept clarity has been found to mediate the relationship between a range of life stressors and well-being, including the stress experienced by a perceived discontinuity between past and present selves (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011). Experiences of socioeconomic mobility, whether upward or downward, are especially likely to exacerbate these feelings of discontinuity as people struggle to make sense of who they are, where they belong, and where they are going. Second, self-concept clarity has already been expanded to broader levels of identity beyond the personal or individual self, such as cultural identity clarity, with similar implications for well-being (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Thus, it seems both plausible and important to extend the concept to uncertainty regarding one's SES. Given that uncertainty about one's personal or cultural identity has implications for well-being and that SES has far-reaching relevance in people's lives, we expect that status-based identity uncertainty will also give rise to its own specific challenges for achievement, health, and well-being.

We propose that similar to being low in self-concept clarity, people will find it uncomfortable, disconcerting, and distracting to experience high levels of status-based identity uncertainty. Uncertainty, in general, is aversive and disruptive to affect and cognition in ways that can interrupt daily functioning. We expect the effects of status-based identity uncertainty to be uniquely unnerving because people often struggle to acknowledge and verbalize issues of class or class identification, especially in American society with its emphasis on meritocracy (McCoy & Major, 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011). As status-based identity uncertainty disrupts an individual's daily life, it is likely to precipitate stress and interfere with the pursuit of goals, leading to several testable predictions related to the components of status-based identity. We expect that those who experience status-based identity uncertainty will struggle to form a cohesive narrative identity, feeling stalled at critical turning points and unable to negotiate their past and present. We also expect a negative effect on social identities such that status-based identity predicts a weaker sense of belonging in social groups that help to define SES. Finally, we expect that future identities will be influenced, and those who experience status-based identity uncertainty will feel insecurity and negative affect about where the future may lead them. Thus, the cumulative impact of status-based identity uncertainty might render people insufficiently grounded to pursue any given path or objective with conviction.

A Foundation for Research on Status-Based Identity

Measuring status-based identity uncertainty

We developed the status-based identity uncertainty scale to capture people's fluid experiences of ambiguity regarding their SES. We adapted scale items from the more general self-concept clarity scale to focus specifically on people's beliefs about their current SES. The original self-concept clarity scale measures how people think about their personality and sense of self; it assesses whether people's self-views are conflicting, poorly defined, or susceptible to change. Our status-based identity uncertainty scale taps the extent to which people's views about their SES in particular can feel unstable or ill defined. Our adapted scale items include, "Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone how I view my own social standing" and "On one day I might have one opinion of my social standing and on another day I might have a different opinion" (see Table 1). Before rating their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale, people are given the following instructions to initiate their thoughts about their own SES:

> ". . . think about your status in society, which is often thought of as determined by your income, education level, and occupational prestige. So, you might consider your family background, where you stand now, and/or where you think you are headed later in life."

Despite the similarities between status-based identity uncertainty and self-concept clarity, we believe there are important theoretical and conceptual distinctions between the two. Self-concept clarity occurs at the broader level of the overarching sociocultural self, which includes a combination of many different self-related processes and individual identities. So, self-concept clarity is a broader concept than status-based identity uncertainty and is more likely to capture a sense of uncertainty regarding the generalized self. Status-based identity uncertainty, on the other hand, captures uncertainty that occurs specifically at the level of status-based identity situated within the broader sociocultural self.

One implication of this distinction, then, is that although both forms of uncertainty are aversive, we predict that status-based identity uncertainty fluctuates systematically according to changes in SES and becomes more acute during periods of social mobility. In contrast, we predict that self-concept clarity, which taps into a broader set of experiences, is related to a person's more general psychological characteristics and disposition. In

Table 1. The Status-Based Identity Uncertainty Scale

Status-based identity uncertainty scale items	Original self-concept clarity scale items (Campbell et al., 1996)
1. My beliefs about where I stand in society often conflict with one another.	1. My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another. (R)
2. On one day I might have one opinion of my social standing and on another day I might have a different opinion.	2. On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion. (R)
3. I spend a lot of time wondering about where I stand in society.	3. I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am. (R)
4. Sometimes I feel that I am not really the social status that others think I am.	4. Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be. (R)
5. When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I'm not sure what it means for my current social standing.	5. When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I'm not sure what I was really like. (R)
6. I seldom experience conflict between where I've been and where I'm going in society. (R)	6. I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.
7. Sometimes I think it's easier to identify where other people stand in society than to identify where I stand.	7. Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself. (R)
8. My beliefs about where I stand in society seem to change frequently.	8. My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently. (R)
9. If I were asked to describe my standing in society, my description might end up being different from one day to another day.	9. If I were asked to describe my personality, my description might end up being different from one day to another day. (R)
10. Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone how I view my own social standing.	10. Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I'm really like. (R)
11. In general, I have a clear sense of where I stand in society. (R)	11. In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.
12. It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don't have a clear sense of my status in society.	12. It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don't really know what I want. (R)

Note: (R) = reverse-scored item.

other words, because it is directly tied to a person's subjective understanding and meaning of their own SES, status-based identity uncertainty is more sensitive to people's socioeconomic circumstances and experiences of socioeconomic mobility than is general self-concept clarity. As a result, status-based identity uncertainty provides an unexplored mechanism with which to explain how SES and experiences of socioeconomic mobility can lead to positive or negative psychological functioning and well-being across several important domains.

In an initial inquiry into these possibilities, we distributed a survey containing the status-based identity uncertainty scale ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 3.84$, $SD = .99$), the self-concept clarity scale ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.10$), and key psychological measures to 151 first year undergraduate students during their first few weeks (i.e., as they were transitioning) at a private 4-year university. We recruited first year undergraduate students because they are an ideal group with which to begin our investigation of status-based identity (and status-based identity uncertainty) as the complex and malleable understanding and meaning that people attach to their SES. The status-based identity of any individual first year college student is influenced by a unique combination of their background, their own perceived SES in college, and their expectations after college. Furthermore, we expect the relative importance and stability of each of these aspects of status-based identity to vary systematically depending upon a student's family income, which we will describe and evaluate in greater detail.

Before testing several predictions of our model, we evaluated the interitem correlations of the status-based identity uncertainty scale (SBIU) to assess the reliability of our scale construction. The ideal range for individual interitem correlations is .15–.50 (Clark & Watson, 1995), and the corrected item-total correlation should be at least .30 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). As shown in Table 2, all items had acceptable individual interitem correlations and corrected item-total correlations except Item #6, which was more relevant to the experience of internal conflict than uncertainty and has been removed from other modified versions of the self-concept clarity scale (We-SCC; Emery, Gardner, Carswell, & Finkel, 2016). Therefore, we removed Item #6 from the SBIU.

We then conducted an exploratory factor analysis including all items from the 11-item SBIU and the 12-item

Table 2. Interitem and Corrected Item Total Correlations by Scale Item

Item number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	1.000											
2	.516	1.000										
3	.438	.424	1.000									
4	.344	.418	.362	1.000								
5	.378	.357	.360	.408	1.000							
6	.177	**.131**	.248	**.044**	.170	1.000						
7	.212	.223	.285	.325	.365	**−.001**	1.000					
8	.501	.573	.562	.280	.474	**.145**	.394	1.000				
9	.444	.610	.511	.321	.491	.169	.326	.769	1.000			
10	.293	.242	.338	.167	.366	**.128**	.315	.454	.425	1.000		
11	.409	.399	.426	.236	.296	.215	.239	.513	.477	.533	1.000	
12	.331	.216	.338	.202	.345	**.071**	.176	.352	.269	.371	.309	1.000
Corrected Item-Total Correlation	.589	.597	.626	.444	.582	**.207**	.406	.747	.713	.518	.590	.422

Note: Bold face indicates values that fall below the ideal range or values that do not meet suggested cutoffs.

SCC to evaluate our theory-driven two-factor structure (Costello & Osborne, 2005). The two-factor model converged showing items from each scale loading clearly on their respective factors (see Table 3). Only one SBIU item loaded weakly onto both factors (#4; "Sometimes I feel that I am not really the social status that I appear to be"). Due to its theoretical significance and high interitem correlations with other SBIU items, we retained the item in question in the final scale, which showed high overall reliability (α = .87, M = 3.84, SD = .99).

We also evaluated two alternative models to rule out a simpler or more complex factor structure. First, when we attempted to evaluate whether a more complex three-factor structure existed, the model failed to converge altogether. Next, the simpler one-factor model, including all 11 SBIU items and all 12 SCC items, converged—however, the scale had low reliability (α = .57, M = 3.90, SD = .50), and the one-factor model had significantly worse model fit than did the two-factor model, $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 227.94$, $p < .001$. Although status-based identity uncertainty and self-concept clarity were related to one another, $r(149) = -.556$, $p < .001$, results of our preliminary analyses supported our expectation that they represent two distinct constructs.

Next, we conducted a series of partial correlations comparing the relationship between SBIU and SCC and several other constructs that we measured to test predictions of the status-based identity model and assess convergent and discriminant validity (see Tables 4 and 5). First, status-based identity uncertainty is aversive. As predicted, higher levels of status-based identity uncertainty uniquely predicted lower self-esteem, $r_{SBIU.SCC}(148) = -.239$, p = .003, and lower satisfaction with life, $r_{SBIU.SCC}(148) = -.172$, p = .035, controlling for the established influence of general self-concept clarity on self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Second, as described previously, we expected status-based identity uncertainty to be more pronounced for those students for whom college is likely to promote upward social mobility. In addition, lower family income was associated with greater status-based identity uncertainty, controlling for self-concept clarity, $r_{SBIU.SCC}(148) = -.185$, p = .023. General self-concept clarity, on the other hand, did not have a significant relationship with income.[1]

Relationships between status-based identity uncertainty and narrative, social, and future identity

We tested the proposed links between status-based identity uncertainty and the other components of the status-based identity model as they relate to the experience of first-year college students while controlling for general self-concept clarity. Specifically, we predicted that greater status-based identity uncertainty would predict a less cohesive narrative identity, a weaker social identity as a college student, and a less positive future identity. We adapted a measure of self-other overlap (see Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) to measure the extent to which participants' narrative identity draws a connection from their past SES to their current SES. Each participant selected one of seven pairs of circles that most closely represented the degree of connection that they perceived between their past SES and their current SES. This measure is designed to capture more than just the similarity between their past and future SES (i.e., expected mobility), but rather their

Table 3. Factor Loadings Based on Maximum Likelihood Analyses for 12 Self-Concept Clarity Items and 11 Status-Based Identity Uncertainty Items

Item	Oblimin rotation		Varimax rotation		Promax rotation	
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
SCC 1	**.738**	–.137	**.747**	**–.322**	**.752**	–.100
SCC 2	**.749**	–.100	**.749**	–.289	**.766**	–.061
SCC 3	**.546**	–.066	**.544**	–.203	**.559**	–.037
SCC 4	**.717**	.030	**.686**	–.154	**.742**	.072
SCC 5	**.547**	–.073	**.547**	–.211	**.559**	–.045
SCC 6	**.685**	**.345**	**.577**	.159	**.728**	**.396**
SCC 7	**.434**	–.095	**.443**	–.204	**.441**	–.074
SCC 8	**.787**	–.064	**.776**	–.263	**.807**	–.021
SCC 9	**.609**	–.125	**.620**	–.277	**.620**	–.095
SCC 10	**.427**	–.193	**.460**	–.296	**.428**	–.176
SCC 11	**.505**	–.128	**.519**	–.253	**.512**	–.104
SCC 12	**.325**	–.115	**.343**	–.195	**.328**	–.101
SBIU 1	–.138	**.550**	–.269	**.569**	–.107	**.562**
SBIU 2	–.175	**.573**	**–.310**	**.601**	–.143	**.584**
SBIU 3	–.152	**.563**	–.285	**.584**	–.120	**.574**
SBIU 4	**–.305**	.262	**–.359**	**.332**	–.298	.254
SBIU 5	–.045	**.567**	–.183	**.561**	–.010	**.585**
SBIU 7	.070	**.480**	–.050	**.448**	.103	**.501**
SBIU 8	.051	**.897**	–.171	**.857**	.110	**.932**
SBIU 9	–.063	**.792**	–.255	**.783**	–.014	**.816**
SBIU 10	–.018	**.561**	–.155	**.548**	.018	**.580**
SBIU 11	–.039	**.594**	–.183	**.585**	–.001	**.613**
SBIU 12	–.059	**.398**	–.155	**.401**	–.035	**.408**

Note: N = 151. Factor loadings > .3 are in bold. SCC = self-concept clarity; SBIU = status-based identity uncertainty.

subjective feeling of connection between the two. So, even for someone who has experienced social mobility, they could still have a narrative identity that establishes a closer connection between their past and current SES. As predicted, greater status-based identity uncertainty predicted a weaker perceived connection between participants' past and current SES, $r_{SBIU.SCC}$ (148) = –.333, $p < .001$, indicating a less cohesive narrative identity.

Next, we evaluated the relationship between status-based identity uncertainty and a measure of the strength of each participant's social identity as a college student on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (i.e., belonging; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Recall that all participants were just entering their first year of college, and it is important to feel like a legitimate member of the group in this context. As predicted, students who were higher in status-based identity uncertainty reported lower levels of belonging in college, $r_{SBIU.SCC}$ (148) = –.182, p = .025. Greater status-based identity uncertainty, in other words, predicted a weaker sense of membership within an important and valuable social group in their new context.

Last, we evaluated the relationship between status-based identity uncertainty and students' future identities. As part of the same survey, first-year college students completed a measure designed to captured their affect regarding post-college prospects (composite ratings of blue, hopeless, and upset on a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*), adapted from O'Brien & Major, 2005). As expected, students with greater status-based identity uncertainty experienced more negative feelings regarding their post-college prospects, $r_{SBIU.SCC}$(148) = .234, p = .004. Status-based identity uncertainty predicts a more pessimistic future identity or outlook towards the future.

As shown in Table 5, general self-concept clarity was less strongly related or unrelated to all of these outcomes, which are specifically relevant to status-based identity for college students. Instead, general self-concept clarity was positively related to a general sense of optimism, $r_{SCC.SBIU}$(148) = .395, $p < .001$, and negatively related to neuroticism, $r_{SCC.SBIU}$(148) = –.343, $p < .001$, whereas status-based identity uncertainty was unrelated to these more global psychological characteristics.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Relevant Constructs

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Item(s) used	Source	α
Age	18.0	21.0	18.24	.55			
Income	1.0	9.0	4.95	2.57			
Status-based identity uncertainty	1.09	6.45	3.84	.99	11-item scale (see Table 1)		.87
Self-concept clarity	1.50	6.58	3.96	1.10	12-item scale (see Table 1)	Campbell et al., 1996	.88
					Well-being		
Self-esteem	1.20	7.00	4.86	1.24	10-item scale (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.")	Rosenberg (1965)	.92
SWLS	1.00	7.00	4.86	1.20	5-item scale (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal.")	Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin (1985)	.83
					Aspects of status-based identity		
Narrative identity: Past/current status	1	7	4.51	1.60	"Please select the pair of circles that best represents the relationship between your past/family status in society and your current status in society . . ."	Adapted from IOS circle literature (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992)	
Social identity: Belonging	1	7	5.56	1.24	"I belong at [University name]."	Walton and Cohen (2007)	
Future identity: Negative post-college affect	1.00	4.33	1.47	.61	". . . To what extent does each of the following describe your current feelings about your post-[University name] prospects?" Composite of blue, hopeless, and upset	Adapted from O'Brien and Major (2005)	.67
					General characteristics		
Optimism	1	7	5.03	1.59	"I'm always optimistic about my future."	Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (1994)	
Neuroticism	1	7	3.52	1.73	"I see myself as anxious and easily upset."	Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003)	

Note: N = 151. SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

Taken together, these analyses offer initial empirical evidence regarding the reliability and measurement validity of status-based identity uncertainty, particularly during periods of potential social mobility. In the next section, we describe why we anticipate that levels of status-based identity uncertainty may shift systematically during college as students from different backgrounds become more or less secure in their current SES (i.e., uncertain about) and begin to imagine a certain or relatively uncertain future SES.

Critical periods for status-based identity. We have described status-based identity as inherently subjective and malleable; however, there are particular stages of life during which people are more likely to experience fluctuations and, thus, uncertainty in their status-based identity. These include periods when social mobility is likely, such as during adolescence, young adulthood, and entry into the labor force, or later in life as a result of marriage, divorce, or retirement. Because higher education remains one of the strongest predictors of social mobility (Baum et al., 2013), we begin our investigation with attention to the college years and the years just after.

The concept of status-based identity is well-suited to improve our understanding of how students experience their SES during college (particularly at 4-year colleges and universities) because it captures a combination of how they understand their past SES of origin and the influence of their current social group memberships and relationships during college and how they imagine their future SES after graduation. Because college is a time when a person's understanding of these factors is in flux, many students are likely to experience status-based identity uncertainty. The nature and timing of the uncertainty,

Table 5. Partial Correlations Reflecting the Unique Relationships Between Either SBIU or SCC and Relevant Variables

Variable measured	SBIU, controlling for SCC	SCC, controlling for SBIU
Income	−0.185*	−0.048
Well-being		
Self-esteem	−0.239**	0.505***
SWLS	−0.172*	0.217**
Aspects of status-based identity		
Narrative identity: Past/current status	−0.333***	−0.176*
Social identity: Belonging	−0.182*	0.134
Future identity: Negative post-college affect	0.234**	-0.024
General characteristics		
Optimism	0.054	0.395***
Neuroticism	−0.007	−0.343***

Note: SBIU = status-based uncertainty scale; SCC = self-concept clarity scale; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

however, is likely to vary systematically according to each individual's SES of origin. For a college student from a low-SES family background, college leads to status-based identity uncertainty because upward mobility is likely to be a salient goal. For example, low-SES students are especially drawn toward education by learning about how it can lead to social mobility (Destin & Oyserman, 2010), and they are likely to seek majors that are associated with greater occupational prestige and financial security (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). So, for low-SES students, the connection between education and social mobility is especially salient and motivating. As they enter college and anticipate rising the socioeconomic ladder, low-SES students experience relatively more difficulty reconciling their past, low-SES identity with their evolving, upwardly mobile identity than do students from higher SES backgrounds, consistent with the foundational data described previously.

Status-based identity uncertainty can also be triggered by cultural mismatch, as low-SES students move into unfamiliar and relatively elite college environments that differ distinctly from their home environments (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). Because status-based identity is situated within the sociocultural self, it provides specific mechanisms to investigate how a person's subjective construal and meaning of their SES interacts with changing contexts especially as they draw comparisons between themselves and their peers. Upon matriculation, the low relative status of low-SES students becomes particularly salient and creates a challenge to fit in with their new surroundings. In one series of studies, Johnson et al. (2011) found that relatively lower SES was associated with greater concern about academic fit during college, which led to poorer self-regulation. They also found, however, that the opportunity to make a downward social comparison (i.e., think about someone at a less selective college or university) led low-SES students to perform better on a Stroop task of self-regulation. We argue that social comparison provided a route to activate different aspects of a student's status-based identity with immediate consequences for cognition and motivation.

Thus, low-SES students experience difficulty reconciling their past and present status, as their status-based identities evolve during college. This difficulty continues as they work to attain higher SES and approach college graduation, subsequent employment, or continued educational opportunities (e.g., graduate school). As a result, we expect that low-SES students are vulnerable to status-based identity uncertainty that begins earlier and lasts longer relative to their high-SES counterparts. As described, early adjustment challenges make it difficult for low-SES college students to reconcile the narrative of their past status with their current status in college and increase the likelihood that they feel that they do not belong (Johnson et al., 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007). As college progresses, low-SES students tend to experience less social inclusion during college than high-SES students (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Walpole, 2003), which we expect to reinforce continued status-based identity uncertainty. Finally, as they approach graduation, low-SES students tend to have less promising post-college prospects than high-SES students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003), which we also expect to contribute to status-based identity uncertainty toward the end of college. Future research remains necessary to evaluate the hypothesis

that low-SES students are at risk of status-based identity uncertainty throughout college and strategies that can be employed to reduce or cope with such challenges.

High-SES students, on the other hand, are less likely to experience status-based identity uncertainty at the beginning of college than are low-SES students, as shown in our initial early data, because the socioeconomic context of college is more likely to match the background of their past. Instead, we expect that high-SES students begin to experience status-based identity uncertainty toward the end of their college careers. Especially during periods of heightened economic inequality or economic downturn at the local or national level, high-SES students may begin to realize that they are unlikely to graduate from college and immediately experience the same financial standing and stability as their parents (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Kahn, 2010). Although yet understudied, these students might increasingly perceive the possibility of a decline in SES after college, especially relative to a wealthy upbringing. These perceptions may even be informed by recent reports that rates of inter-generational mobility in the United States have stagnated and are lower relative to other developed countries, as well as rising levels of college loan debt (Price & Spivakovsky-Gonzalez, 2014). Thus, we predict that high-SES students begin to experience status-based identity uncertainty as the image of their future identity comes into question and conflicts with the narrative of their SES and sense of belonging to a high-SES social group.

Another possible trigger of status-based identity uncertainty for high-SES students is upward social comparisons with more advantaged peers. In the series of studies by Johnson and colleagues (2011) described previously, upward social comparison (with a student from a higher status college or institution) had a negative effect on the Stroop task performance of high-SES students. At elite institutions, college students can regularly engage in such comparisons with peers who are, for example, wealthier or quicker to secure post-college employment. In another study using a minimal group paradigm, members of a situationally induced high status group experienced physiological threat responses when their status was unstable (Scheepers, Ellemers, & Sintemaartensdijk, 2009). Taken together, this work suggests that competitive work and school environments can lead high-SES individuals to perceive their SES as tenuous, which we expect to be captured as an increase in status-based identity uncertainty.

Of course, alternatively, high SES motivates people to maintain their high standing and concentrate their attention on people, resources, and strategies that offer such opportunities (Fiske, 2010a). Some high-SES students avoid status transitions through sustained access to their family's resources (i.e., social connections, financial support). Such resources make it easier to pursue unpaid career-building activities and buffer students from abrupt SES changes. For example, a student may spend the summer working as an intern at a parent's law firm or spend a year after college working in the research lab of a family friend. These opportunities would allow them to maintain a cohesive sense of their status-based identity and to feel less status-based identity uncertainty. In other words, we expect that the onset of status-based identity uncertainty can serve as a motivational cue that leads high-SES students to draw on available resources to assuage the uncertainty.

Although we have drawn attention to college as a period of heightened status-based identity uncertainty, there are a number of other major life events throughout adulthood that often lead to a dramatic change in SES and the emergence of status-based identity uncertainty. Marriage, divorce, and remarriage often precipitate changes in financial resources, living arrangements, employment, and SES in general (Day & Bahr, 1986; Gadalla, 2008; Previti & Amato, 2003). For example, Gadalla (2008) found that one in five women fell into poverty during the year of a marital dissolution, and another study documented how women struggle to define their social class after divorce and downward mobility (Grella, 1990). Similarly, job loss or major promotions also lead to uncertainty regarding SES. Finally, retirement and exiting the employment sector accompany lifestyle changes that can increase status-based identity uncertainty (Tissue, 1970).

In all of these scenarios, both an individual's perceived and actual SES are in flux and uncertain. Our attention to the subjective meaning that people attach to SES is well-suited to focus heavily on these periods when the potential antecedents of such status-based identity uncertainty are likely to occur. These diverse circumstances illuminate that in addition to status change being upward or downward, it can also be volitional or involuntary. People consistently desire a sense of agency in their lives (see Pratto, 2016), and we predict that involuntary and downward mobility lead to the greatest degree of status-based identity uncertainty. Involuntary downward mobility is most likely to be unexpected, undesirable, and out of one's control, requiring more effort to negotiate the sudden inconsistencies between people's narratives of their SES, their current social group memberships, and their imagined future identities.

In addition to our predictions regarding the situational factors that influence status-based identity uncertainty, we also expect status-based identity (and status-based identity uncertainty) to exert predictable effects on general psychological processes, behaviors, and life outcomes, including the examples that we describe in the following section. We encourage researchers of diverse interests to

evaluate different aspects of status-based identity (narrative identity, social identity, future identity) and status-based identity uncertainty as potential predictors of a range of outcomes related to health and well-being.

Status-based identity and other life domains

Given the wide variety of ways that SES (e.g., social cognitive and cultural approaches) and identity (e.g., narrative, social, and future identity) have been found to shape people's lives, we expect the combined construct of status-based identity to influence life outcomes across a wide range of domains, in addition to the previously mentioned domains of education and employment. For example, although we discussed how upwardly mobile students experience increased status-based identity uncertainty and relate differently to their past and current social identity communities, we expect status-based identity to affect processes in day-to-day social relationships more generally. People are simply more likely to encounter and initiate relationships with others who share a similar SES (see Massey & Denton, 1993). Shared SES also increases the extent to which two people feel close and similar to one another, which increases the likelihood that they will build and fortify relational bonds (Byrne, Griffitt, & Stefaniak, 1967; Moreland & Zajonc, 1982). Moving beyond simple SES effects, we expect a person's more dynamic and nuanced status-based identity to systematically influence whether and how they initiate, sustain, and end interpersonal relationships.

The concept of status-based identity, in other words, adds a critical layer of complexity by acknowledging the roles of status change and self-construal. Even when two individuals share current SES markers (e.g., income, education, employment, wealth), important aspects of their status-based identity may be incongruent. For example, two successful attorneys may have vastly different narratives, with one overcoming childhood poverty to achieve social mobility and the other following in the family tradition of practicing law. One might feel very disconnected from other upper middle class professionals, whereas the other may feel more closely connected to her current colleagues. Finally, one might imagine a future where she transitions toward more pro-bono work and spends more time with family whereas the other might imagine a future where she becomes a partner, starts a law firm, or seeks public office. Despite their shared SES, in other words, these two individuals have very different status-based identities and are likely to experience different levels of status-based identity uncertainty. When two people share a similar sense of the more nuanced aspects of their status-based identities, we expect them to feel more comfortable expressing their authentic self to one another (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary, Tchividijian, & Kraxberger, 1994). On the other hand, people may hesitate to initiate new relationships when status-based identity uncertainty is high, during periods of status changes, or when entering a new socioeconomic context. For example, people who struggle with "impostor phenomenon" exhibit a specific type of status-based identity uncertainty where they fail to fully internalize their accomplishments and worry about being fully accepted by others who share their emerging SES (Clance, 1985; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Wagoner Funk, 2000).

We also expect status-based identity to influence whether and how relationships end. For example, people sometimes inadvertently use relationship partners to establish a stronger sense of their own traits, preferences, and identity, essentially using romantic relationships to bolster their general sense of self-concept clarity (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). As a result, one series of studies illustrated that the dissolution of a relationship often leads to a significant drop in self-concept clarity for the relationship partners (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Similarly, relationships shape a person's status-based identity. As mentioned in our discussion of critical periods of status-based identity uncertainty, entering or leaving a significant romantic relationship can change the financial and related social resources available to an individual. Relationships also influence people's social identities and future identities by transforming the composition of their social networks and changing how they imagine their futures. All of these changes accompany significant shifts in a person's status-based identity, and, therefore, the end of a relationship may precipitate an increase in status-based identity uncertainty as people again attempt to redefine themselves, their lives, and their place in society.

Taken together, we predict that the connection between romantic relationships and status-based identity is likely to be bidirectional. As described previously, people are more likely to initiate romantic relationships with those who share similar components of their status-based identities and less likely to engage in romantic relationships when status-based identity uncertainty is high. At the same time, however, relationships themselves influence a person's status-based identity, and we predict that the end of a relationship is likely to lead to an increase in status-based identity uncertainty.

Another life domain that is closely related to SES, identity, and status-based identity is financial behavior. In fact, studies have already illustrated a consistent relationship between future identity and saving behaviors. Several recent studies have shown that people who feel a stronger sense of connection between their current self and their future self are more highly attuned to future financial rewards in a laboratory task and even accumulate more financial assets

in their actual lives (Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, Ballard, Samanez-Larkin, & Knutson, 2009; Hershfield, 2011). Further, in studies that experimentally induce participants to experience a greater sense of connection to their future selves, they subsequently discount the future less and reduce costly spending (Bartels & Rips, 2010; Bartels & Urminsky, 2015). The concept of status-based identity directly considers how people imagine their future identities, including the extent to which the future feels within reach and connected to their lives. Thus, building upon existing research in this area, we predict that the more that a person's future identity is incorporated in their current SES, the more likely they will be to engage in saving behaviors rather than costly consumption behaviors.

Financial behaviors are also related to people's feelings of uncertainty and risk, such that people are more confident in their financial decisions when fewer unknown factors can affect the outcome of that decision (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Uncertainty is usually operationalized at the contextual or societal level; however, our viewpoint suggests that an individual's uncertainty about his or her own SES will also influence financial behaviors. We predict that the relationship between status-based identity uncertainty and financial behaviors will be complex, with distinct patterns for low- vs. high-SES individuals. Several studies have shown that as a result of different life experiences, low-SES individuals are more vigilant to threat than are high-SES individuals (Chen, Langer, Raphaelson, & Matthews, 2004; Scholl, Sassenrath, & Sassenberg, 2015). Therefore, we expect status-based identity uncertainty to heighten perceived risks and encourage greater saving behaviors and less costly spending for low-SES individuals. On the other hand, we expect that high-SES individuals may be more likely to interpret a sense of status-based identity uncertainty as a potential financial opportunity than would low-SES individuals, leading to greater spending and less conservative saving behaviors.

Conclusion

We have provided evidence that status-based identity, which captures the nuanced ways in which we conceive of our own SES, has a significant and predictable influence on various aspects of our lives from educational attainment, to relationships, to financial behaviors, and beyond with numerous implications for health and well-being. Our viewpoint offers a new lens that advances and integrates existing conceptualizations of SES to incorporate people's narratives of their evolving SES (narrative identity), their SES-relevant social group memberships (social identity), their ideas about their future SES (future identity), and the sense of uncertainty that can emerge as people move from one SES to another and these factors shift and interact (status-based identity uncertainty).

Psychological science has progressed significantly in recent years both in its acknowledgement of the relevance of SES and also in its substantive investigation of systematic differences in how people experience the world from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic ladder (e.g., Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). The status-based identity concept provides the opportunity to ask new questions with a unique emphasis on how people *understand* the meaning and nature of their own standing within the socioeconomic hierarchy. In doing so, we aim not only to advance the psychological study of SES but also to provide a nimble perspective that is adaptable to our ever-changing societal structure and of practical value in interpreting important, real-world social issues and current affairs.

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Note

1. We used income rather than other indicators of SES because it allowed us to recruit participants and conduct analyses along the widest possible range of SES. Despite the predicted systematic differences in levels of status-based identity uncertainty across income groups and differences in the factors that contribute to status-based identity for students from different incomes, a confirmatory factor analysis did not find a significant difference in factor loadings or model fit across income groups, indicating that there was sufficient measurement invariance and the same overall construct was measured across income groups, $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 98.2$, $p = .215$.

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