

Ideal Balance and Real Ladder: Psychological Perspectives on Social Stratification and Fairness (Postprint)

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Abstract

Social fairness is both an eternal pursuit of humanity and a core value concept permeating contemporary Chinese social governance. However, the severe phenomena of class disparities and class solidification currently prevalent in society have substantially constrained the realization of social fairness. In response, social stratification psychology has undertaken research addressing several core issues: the psychological mechanisms by which social stratification impedes social fairness, the psychological characteristics of different social classes in perceiving social stratification and fairness, and strategies for enhancing class mobility to better promote social fairness, examining these from the perspectives of objective social reality, public subjective perception, and psychological intervention. Future psychological research on social stratification and social fairness should further refine indigenized theories, employ diverse research methodologies, and advance the application of research findings to serve social governance practice.

Full Text

Ideal Balance versus Realistic Ladder: Research on Social Stratification and Fairness from a Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Social fairness represents an eternal human pursuit and constitutes a core value permeating contemporary China's social governance. However, severe class differentiation and class solidification in current society have substantially constrained the realization of social fairness. In response to this challenge, social class psychology has conducted research from three perspectives—social objective reality, public subjective experience, and psychological intervention strategies—focusing on core questions including the psychological mechanisms through which social stratification impedes social fairness, the psychological characteristics of different social classes in perceiving stratification and fairness, and how to enhance class mobility to better promote social fairness. Future psychological research on social stratification and fairness should further refine localized theories, employ diversified research methods, and advance the application of research findings to serve social governance practice.

Keywords: social stratification, social fairness, social class psychology, class solidification

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Social fairness is an eternal human pursuit [1] and a core value running through contemporary China's social governance [2]. From an academic perspective, social fairness is a complex value scale involving equality of rights, rationality of distribution, equality of opportunity, judicial impartiality, and multiple other dimensions [3,4]. Its core connotation emphasizes the “uniformity of standards” in social processes [5]. However, ordinary citizens often conceptualize social fairness in more concrete terms [6], and scholars generally agree that these subjective fairness perceptions merit serious attention [7]. For instance, people frequently use a balance scale to represent fairness [8], which, although not perfectly aligned with technical definitions, authentically reflects public conceptions of fairness.

In stark contrast to this horizontal “ideal balance” is the vertical “ladder relationship” that pervades reality—the notion that hierarchical distinctions exist among people. Social sciences conventionally employ the concept of social class to describe these differences. Broadly speaking, social class refers to groups occupying different positions within a social hierarchy, characterized not only by objective differences in social resources but also by subjective perceptions of one's own social status [9]. While such objective and subjective differences between classes do not necessarily imply unfairness—since absolute equality is neither realistic nor desirable [10]—the critical measure of whether stratification in a system is fair lies in whether fluid mobility mechanisms exist between classes [11,12]. Unfortunately, data on contemporary Chinese society in this regard are not optimistic. Although cases of “poor families producing successful

children” and “wealth not lasting three generations” are not uncommon, individual achievements generally correlate strongly with family background. People from lower-class origins lag significantly behind their higher-class counterparts in academic achievement [13], employment starting points [14], opportunities for success [15], and career performance [16], directly contributing to China’s current severe class solidification. Thus, while social stratification itself does not equal injustice, achieving social fairness in present-day China inevitably requires addressing the role of stratification—a consensus already reached across multiple disciplines in domestic academia [17-19].

What unique contributions can psychology offer on this issue? Compared with sociology, management, education, and other disciplines, psychology emphasizes fine-grained, foundational empirical research, clearly focusing on specific individuals or groups and revealing the overall social class and fairness situation through investigation of internal psychological patterns. Moreover, it explores relevant coping strategies from the perspective of changing human psychology and behavior. What issues does psychological research on social class and fairness involve, and what contributions has it made? We will elaborate on these questions in the following sections.

1. Objective Reality: The Psychological Mechanisms by Which Social Stratification Hinders Social Fairness

Previous political and sociological research on how social stratification affects social fairness has primarily focused on institutional-level mechanisms [20-22]. However, do factors within different class groups themselves also play a role? Social class psychology, which examines psychological and behavioral differences between higher and lower classes, provides important supplementary explanations. From a psychological perspective, one crucial reason for the unbridgeable gap between classes is stratification itself—the multifaceted differences between higher and lower classes create barriers that prevent lower-class individuals from upward mobility [23].

1.1 Structural Factors

Structural factors concern differences in social resources and material conditions accessible to higher versus lower classes. Many scholars argue these disparities constitute a major cause of social inequality, as they prevent lower-class individuals from moving upward [24]. Although structural factors are not strictly psychological in nature, their impact on lower-class individuals is mediated through psychological processes. For example, compared with higher classes, lower classes experience lower income, poorer living conditions, and more uncertain environments, creating feelings of insecurity and greater deprivation that hinder success [23]. Particularly noteworthy is that while education has long been considered an effective means to break class solidification, lower-class individuals typically lack comparable educational conditions: their parents have

lower educational attainment and cannot effectively assist their children; moreover, they hold lower-status occupations with less income, making it difficult to afford tutoring or private lessons, and their children attend schools with generally lower quality and weaker teaching staff [25]. These structural conditions substantially constrain the psychological development and academic achievement of lower-class children.

1.2 Individual Factors

Beyond environmental disadvantages, lower-class individual characteristics (such as traits and abilities) also constitute important factors impeding upward mobility. Social class psychology's primary contribution has been revealing the distinct psychological imprints that class attributes leave on higher and lower classes—significant psychological and behavioral differences that can exacerbate class solidification and inequality [26]. For instance, higher-class individuals typically possess stronger self-regulation abilities, self-efficacy, and reading skills, whereas lower-class individuals often lack these capacities. Many researchers believe lower-class students' poor academic achievement stems precisely from these deficiencies [27-29]. Additional research has examined differences between classes in sense of control [30], control strategies [31], and achievement attribution [32], all of which are closely related to academic and career success, with studies consistently showing lower classes are inferior to higher classes in these qualities.

1.3 Cultural Factors

Structural and individual factors analyze the psychological mechanisms hindering lower-class success from objective and subjective perspectives respectively. However, recent theoretical and empirical research suggests neither represents the most critical factor; rather, so-called cultural factors play the most important role [33]. Cultural factors are neither purely objective structural elements nor merely subjective individual traits, but rather generalized cultural psychologies—such as self-construal, rules, values, and habitual systems—shared within a class and formed through person-environment interactions [34]. For example, in American society, expressing one's uniqueness is a virtue highly valued by mainstream culture, which happens to be a strength of higher-class individuals. In contrast, lower-class cultural values emphasize interpersonal harmony and mutual assistance over self-uniqueness. Since higher classes wield more power and resources in society, they more strongly promote the cultural values they endorse, while lower classes struggle to gain advantage in this cultural conflict or integrate into higher-class cultural systems [35]. Researchers therefore argue that while structural and individual factors are important, cultural differences between classes constitute the key constraint on lower-class upward mobility [33].

1.4 Intergenerational Transmission Factors

All the aforementioned factors place lower-class individuals at a disadvantage in upward mobility, but more seriously, these factors affect not just one generation but are transmitted across generations within lower-class groups. This intergenerational transmission transforms class differentiation into class solidification, allowing inequality to develop and persist [36]. Using cultural factors, which social class psychology emphasizes, as an example: although these class-based cultural differences may not be consciously recognized, they profoundly influence individuals' lives in subtle ways [23]. Consider two children—one born into a lower-class family with parents who are manual laborers without higher education, and another whose parents have advanced degrees, substantial income, and respected professions. From birth, they face different family rearing environments. Higher-class families, permeated by cultural values that champion freedom, individuality, and innovation, encourage children to explore the world independently and express themselves. Lower-class families, constrained by resources and experiencing economic and environmental pressures, must reduce life uncertainties and emphasize harmony with their surroundings, consequently strictly constraining children and limiting free development while stressing consideration for others in peer interactions [37–39]. When both children enter school, higher-class children—bold, independent, and innovative—often receive more teacher attention and appreciation, while lower-class children—introverted and cautious—struggle to meet teacher expectations and are more easily overlooked or even disliked [40]. Regarding parent-teacher interactions, higher-class parents share more common language and consistent educational philosophies, enabling effective cooperation with teachers, whereas lower-class parents, despite valuing their children's education, often feel they lack sufficient knowledge, easily viewing teachers as authority figures responsible for everything. This cultural notion deepens the gap between parents and teachers, further negatively affecting lower-class children's academic achievement [41]. When seeking employment after graduation, higher-class youth already possess good education, strong expression skills, distinctive personalities, and creativity, while lower-class youth—though possessing many fine qualities such as cooperativeness, conscientiousness, and rule-abidingness—are more likely to inherit their parents' manual labor occupations based on these different qualities. Thus, cultural differences between classes are transmitted across generations, clearly demonstrating that class solidification is not merely a social institutional issue but also significantly influenced by cultural psychology [36].

2. Subjective Experience: Psychological Characteristics of Different Classes in Perceiving Social Stratification and Fairness

The above analysis reveals the psychological mechanisms through which objective social stratification leads to social unfairness. But what subjective perceptions do citizens hold regarding these objective problems? How do higher and

lower classes differ in these perceptions? Examining these questions will help us better grasp the social mentality of different classes and lay a foundation for developing corresponding governance approaches.

2.1 Differences Between Higher and Lower Classes in Perceiving Social Stratification

Why do some people occupy the upper strata while others remain in the lower strata? Citizens may offer many answers to this question, but these can generally be categorized into two types. One concerns individual factors (internal causes), such as higher-class individuals being diligent while lower-class individuals are lazy, or higher-class individuals being more capable. The other concerns systemic factors (external causes), such as higher-class individuals having connections, unequal opportunities between classes, or institutional flaws [43]. Research data consistently show that higher-class individuals tend to understand class differentiation from internal attributions, whereas lower-class individuals more often adopt external attributions [44]. In other words, higher-class individuals generally believe lower-class people occupy the bottom strata due to inherent inferior ability, while lower-class individuals believe higher-class positions result not from ability or effort but from external factors like connections, backdoors, or institutional loopholes. This result fully reflects current interclass prejudice and discrimination.

Beyond differing explanations for the causes of stratification, higher and lower classes also hold different expectations for future mobility. Studies asking citizens to assess lower-class opportunities for upward mobility in the coming period found lower-class individuals hold significantly more pessimistic expectations than higher-class individuals [45]. Thus, lower-class people are not only dissatisfied with existing stratification but also lack confidence in future upward mobility.

2.2 Differences Between Higher and Lower Classes in Perceiving Social Fairness

Differences in how higher and lower classes explain social stratification directly relate to their perceptions of social fairness. Extensive research indicates that compared with higher-class individuals, lower-class individuals feel greater social unfairness [46]. Moreover, domestic research further shows that attribution of social stratification constitutes the psychological mechanism underlying class differences in fairness perception [47]. In other words, lower-class individuals' stronger sense of unfairness largely stems from their greater tendency to attribute stratification to external causes. This again demonstrates how stratification affects social fairness—not only objectively but also in public subjective mentality. Only when people perceive stratification as based on some legitimacy do they consider society fair. Additional research shows higher-class individuals are more inclined to believe society should be inherently unequal, with some groups naturally belonging in upper positions and others in lower po-

sitions, whereas lower-class individuals more strongly oppose this view, vocally advocating for social equality and believing people should not have hierarchical distinctions [48]. These findings more clearly reveal deep differences between classes in understanding social fairness.

2.3 Differences in Sensitivity to Fairness Between Higher and Lower Classes

Lower-class individuals not only perceive greater social unfairness but also exhibit greater sensitivity when encountering the same injustices. In other words, lower-class individuals have higher sensitivity and dependence on fairness than higher-class individuals, yet in reality they are precisely the ones who have more difficulty obtaining fairness [49]. According to social class psychology theory, because higher-class individuals control more abundant resources, they psychologically depend less on environmental support when pursuing personal goals and are therefore relatively insensitive to objective situational factors (such as fairness). In contrast, lower-class individuals, with limited resources, particularly depend on environmental assistance in goal-directed action, making them highly sensitive to whether environmental elements meet their expectations over time. Since fairness constitutes an important supportive force in the environment, lower-class individuals develop greater sensitivity and dependence on fairness than higher-class individuals [50,51]. Many studies support this view. For example, lower-class individuals more easily interpret ambiguous events as unfair [52], show lower tolerance when actually experiencing unfairness, and even exhibit stronger physiological responses (pulse, respiration, skin conductance, muscle tension, etc.) [49]. From this we can readily imagine the social and psychological dilemmas lower-class individuals face in real life.

3. Intervention Strategies

As described above, social stratification has objectively created serious obstacles to social fairness, while subjectively, lower social strata also harbor greater dissatisfaction with this status quo and more urgent expectations for fairness. How then should we change this predicament from a psychological perspective? This is a question we must address. In recent years, social class psychology has expanded from basic research focusing solely on class differences to applied research concerned with class mobility [26], making many beneficial explorations.

3.1 National Level: Reducing Social Restrictions and Enhancing Fairness Perceptions

We do not advocate eliminating classes or absolute egalitarianism, but in a stratified society, fairness remains a core value cherished by all. Therefore, better achieving social fairness should serve as the macro-level foundation for addressing the series of problems described herein, with enhancing fairness perceptions among citizens, particularly lower-class individuals, as a major research goal. It

must be emphasized that enhancing fairness perceptions cannot employ deception as its purpose or means—for example, simply emphasizing self-regulation strategies for disadvantaged groups when suffering injustice, hoping for future justice, or finding 合理化 explanations for current experiences that are easier to accept. Although these methods may temporarily assuage victims' emotions, in the long term, this resigned thinking is detrimental to healthy social development [53]. Therefore, truly promoting fairness and justice must start from systemic flaws in the social system itself, adopting corresponding governance approaches to fundamentally enhance public fairness perceptions.

Existing social class psychology research offers some macro-level insights. Studies show that lower-class individuals experience stronger restriction in society, habitually feeling that their fate is determined more by others than by themselves. This very perception leads them to attribute social stratification more to external causes and to blame social institutions for unfairness [32,47]. If we reduce relevant social restrictions and enhance self-control among disadvantaged groups, can these psychological processes be altered? Clear research supports this approach, showing that reduced restriction significantly changes lower-class individuals' attitudes toward social stratification and fairness, enhancing their sense of fairness [47,54]. These findings inform macro-level governance thinking: reducing restrictions on lower-class individuals constitutes an effective way to alleviate social discontent. In recent years, the topic of “restriction versus deregulation” has frequently appeared in political and academic circles, generating considerable debate regarding housing purchases, transportation, household registration, and other areas. Taking transportation as an example, whether restricting electric bicycles or ride-hailing apps, although government policies have their well-intentioned rationale, each has triggered widespread public dissatisfaction and even backlash. While psychological research cannot yet prescribe a complete solution for such social contradictions, it can provide reference for policy-making from one perspective: although completely eliminating restrictions in social life is impossible, restrictions on disadvantaged groups should be implemented cautiously, and “one-size-fits-all” restriction measures should be avoided. As the saying goes, “blocking is inferior to 疏导” —guidance strategies tailored to local conditions and individual circumstances represent more fundamental solutions.

3.2 Societal Level: Creating Fair Contexts and Promoting Goal Pursuit

Beyond macro-level construction of social foundations for enhancing fairness perceptions, creating specific fair contexts in actual governance work is also essential. Research finds that although lower-class individuals harbor more negative social emotions and possess some conditions unfavorable to upward mobility, these situations alleviate when the environment is relatively fair. For example, as mentioned earlier, lower-class individuals react more strongly and sensitively to unfair treatment, but this reaction diminishes if they experience fair envi-

ronmental conditions before the experiment [49]. Survey research further shows that if a lower-class individual has not experienced much unfair treatment during their growth, their sensitive reaction to unfairness will not be overly strong [49].

The role of fair contexts extends further. We know lower-class upward mobility depends on sustained effort and perseverance toward important life goals such as education and career. However, research shows that lower-class individuals' ability to maintain focus on important goals is significantly affected by environmental fairness: they exhibit strong goal commitment and achievement in fair environments but often give up when facing unfairness [55]. This result easily reminds us of various fairness issues in real society. Take employment fairness as an example. In recent years, recruitment irregularities such as "tailor-made positions" and "backroom operations" have frequently appeared in media reports, transforming the old saying "master mathematics, physics, and chemistry, and you can go anywhere" into "master mathematics, physics, and chemistry, but it's no match for having a good father" [56]. From a psychological perspective, such employment unfairness substantially weakens the motivation of young people from lower-class, unconnected backgrounds, further reducing their drive to pursue goals in an already disadvantaged competitive environment and greatly diminishing their upward mobility potential. Thus, social governance must promote starting-point fairness, procedural fairness, and outcome fairness through legislation, law enforcement, and supervision; establish specific regulations to guarantee fair environments; create sound judicial protection mechanisms for those experiencing unfair treatment; and stipulate legal consequences for responsible parties based on clear standards. Only through such comprehensive governance can we construct fairness that allows lower-class individuals to persist in their efforts and achieve goals with greater peace of mind.

3.3 Individual Level: Strengthening Psychological Interventions and Shaping a Healthy Self

The above strategies adopt the perspective of social governance actors, but micro-level psychological techniques targeting lower-class individuals themselves may be more operable and valuable for helping them overcome disadvantageous factors. Research shows that although lower-class students generally underperform academically compared with higher-class students, their test scores can significantly improve after applying the self-affirmation intervention strategy [57]. Self-affirmation technology is quite simple, with its core idea being to have individuals emphasize, confirm, and affirm their most valued values. The logic behind this method is that emphasizing self-valued aspects can overcome social discrimination and threats to some extent, reconstruct an integrated self-awareness, and restore balance to the self-system. In a two-year longitudinal study, the positive effects of self-affirmation intervention for lower-class students were well-supported, showing not only significant but also long-lasting effects. This series of research findings, all published in *Science*, demonstrates

the powerful effect of self-affirmation technology [57-59].

Another excellent example is implementation intention intervention, which refers to a psychological reminder individuals give themselves before executing valued but difficult-to-maintain goals (for example, “When I sit at my desk later, I will not pick up my phone but take out my planner and start working immediately”). Research proves this intervention helps individuals persist in their set goals and ultimately achieve original plans [60]. Moreover, studies focusing on lower-class individuals find that implementation intention’s positive effects are similarly significant when they pursue important career and academic goals [51]. In summary, such psychological intervention techniques are simple, effective, and flexible, allowing easy expansion from small-scale pilots to large-scale promotion, embodying the essential requirements of refined social governance. Additionally, in specific work, we can implement the collaborative innovation approach advocated by social governance [61], establishing multi-agent collaborative network structures. For example, schools can provide interventions through psychology courses for children and adolescents from lower-class families, while various voluntary or officially-led social organizations can assist disadvantaged adults by selecting and training professional, standardized psychological intervention teams to help lower-class individuals overcome life and psychological disadvantages, thereby better promoting their self-integration and development.

4. Summary and Outlook

Thus far, this article has introduced psychological research progress on social stratification and fairness from three major aspects: social objective reality, public subjective experience, and intervention approaches. As we can see, psychology opens new research perspectives on these issues, enabling the academic community to more clearly appreciate the fundamental role of human hearts and nature, understand public mentality, and grasp citizens’ real needs, thereby achieving more comprehensive understanding of these important social governance problems. However, to better advance research on social stratification and fairness from this “heart-centered” perspective, researchers need to achieve further breakthroughs in several areas.

First, **theoretical localization**. Social class psychology has rapidly developed into a cutting-edge field in international psychology largely because it possesses a relatively complete theoretical system [26]. Chinese psychological research on social class also requires solid and systematic theoretical foundations. Currently, domestic psychology primarily borrows relatively mature theoretical frameworks from abroad to examine Chinese social psychological issues. Although China’s social stratification shares many commonalities with the West, cultural differences and distinct social systems nevertheless mean China’s social stratification and fairness problems have unique characteristics [62]. Therefore, how to absorb common elements from foreign theories while discovering China’s particularities and constructing localized theories more applicable to our national conditions

and populace represents a question requiring deep reflection and practice from Chinese scholars in future research.

Second, **methodological diversification**. Existing psychological research primarily focuses on relationships between variables, examining relatively detailed, micro-level psychological and behavioral patterns through sophisticated research designs, rigorous variable control, and reliable psychological measurement. This is necessary and effective for scientific research. However, expanding research questions to broader social reality and scaling up psychological patterns to more complex social mentality and behavior requires consideration of more systematic, holistic factors and introduction of more targeted research methods. In this regard, psychology researchers in other fields have made many beneficial attempts in recent years. For example, using big data methods, researchers can observe national distribution patterns of citizen well-being [63]; using narrative approaches, they can systematically reveal more complete psychosocial processes by having participants tell stories [64]; using textual semantic analysis, they can accurately monitor public opinion and understand public sentiment characteristics in the context of major social events [65]. Such new methods can obviously be more widely applied to our concerned issues of social stratification and fairness, revealing more valuable conclusions through methodological innovation.

Third, **application of conclusions**. Although psychological research on social stratification and fairness has strong theoretical value, its more important purpose is to serve social governance practice. Objectively speaking, psychology has been relatively deficient in application, related to its historical overemphasis on natural science attributes and neglect of humanities characteristics [66]. However, in recent years, both international and domestic psychology have increasingly focused on application-oriented, reality-facing questions, with more successful practices emerging. Psychology has already played crucial roles in community work, organizational management, student education, crisis response, personnel selection, crime correction, and many other fields. We have reason to believe that with deepening research, psychology can demonstrate its unique value in promoting lower-class upward mobility, changing relationships between higher and lower class groups, enhancing public fairness perceptions, and other broader domains.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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