

Contributions and Limitations of the Subjective Class Research Approach

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Date: 2022-05-12T02:01:23Z

Abstract

In recent years, the field of social class psychology has exhibited a pronounced research orientation toward subjective social class, prominently manifested by an emphasis on the subjective class component within the concept of social class, with a tendency to focus on subjective class in theoretical exposition, conceptual measurement, research design, and selection of research questions. This orientation has laid a foundation for the development of social class psychology and has also expanded the methodological repertoire and scope of issues addressed in this field. However, it has also engendered certain limitations in some research, including a disconnect from social reality at the theoretical level, excessive neglect of objective class at the conceptual level, over-reliance on manipulating subjective class at the methodological level, and at the issue level, a singular focus on binary high-low class divisions with insufficient attention to the diversity of real-world class structures. Future research should further deepen foundational studies to clarify the relationship between objective and subjective class and their distinct predictive effects, make more fine-grained distinctions between objective and subjective class in research design, while also devoting greater attention to concrete social problems in reality.

Full Text

Subjective Class Research in Psychology of Social Class: Its Contributions and Deficiencies

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Abstract: Recently, researchers in the field of social class psychology have attached great importance to the research orientation of subjective class. This perspective emphasizes subjective class in understanding the concept of social class, focusing on the subjective aspect in theoretical exposition, conceptual measurement, research design, and selection of research questions. This orientation has laid a foundation for the development of social class psychology and expanded the research methods and scope of issues in this field. However, it has also caused certain deficiencies: at the theoretical level, some research has become disconnected from social reality; at the conceptual level, objective class has been excessively neglected; at the methodological level, there is over-reliance on manipulating subjective class; and at the level of research questions, there is excessive focus on the high-low binary classification while paying insufficient attention to the diversity of real-world social classes. Future research should further clarify the relationship between objective and subjective classes and their different predictive effects, make more refined distinctions between objective and subjective classes in research design, and pay more attention to specific social problems in reality.

Keywords: psychology of social class, subjective class, objective class

1. The Subjective Class Research Orientation in Psychology of Social Class

In recent years, research in the psychology of social class has attracted increasing attention from the academic community and become a hot topic (e.g., Manstead, 2018; Markus & Stephens, 2017). This is not only due to its inherent academic and practical significance but also because this field has developed relatively mature theories and research orientations. Representative theoretical perspectives include the social cognitive theory of class proposed by Kraus and colleagues (Kraus et al., 2012) and the social cultural theory of class proposed by Stephens and colleagues (Stephens et al., 2012, 2014), which have been systematically reviewed in several domestic literatures from different perspectives (e.g., Guo Yongyu et al., 2015, 2017) and will not be repeated here. Beyond these, some researchers in social class psychology strongly emphasize approaching relevant issues from the perspective of subjective class (e.g., Kraus et al., 2013), and this emphasis on subjective class has become a prominent feature of the field's theoretical and research practice.

Theoretically, the subjective class research orientation tends to view class as a hierarchical perception—an overall understanding of one's relative position formed through social comparison with others (e.g., Kraus et al., 2013). At the conceptual level, this orientation understands social class as comprising both the amount of objective social resources an individual controls (i.e., objective class) and their subjective perception of their own social status (i.e., subjective class, e.g., Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead, 2018), placing greater emphasis on the important influence of subjective class on individuals. Building on this foundation, this orientation has developed experimental paradigms for manipulating

subjective class at the methodological level and has extensively examined psychologically sensitive issues such as class experience, perception of class signals, and perception of class mobility at the level of research questions. Based on these contributions, this orientation has powerfully promoted the development of social class psychology in recent years. However, while affirming its contributions and value, the drawbacks and risks of the subjective class research orientation cannot be ignored. As it has been increasingly adopted by researchers, various problems have emerged. Therefore, the following discussion will examine the contributions and drawbacks of the subjective class research orientation from two major aspects, focusing on four specific levels: theoretical foundation, conceptual measurement, research methods, and research concerns, with the hope that future research based on this orientation can better maximize its strengths and avoid its weaknesses.

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

From the perspective of theoretical foundation, the proposal of the subjective class research orientation in social class psychology aims to provide a supplementary, more psychologically oriented interpretation of social class as understood by sociologists. Generally speaking, social class in sociology refers to a social classification concept based on the possession of social resources (including political, economic, and cultural resources), which can divide individuals in society into groups reflecting social structural characteristics (e.g., Lu Xueyi, 2003; Li Chunling, 2019). However, this classification itself does not necessarily carry hierarchical implications (Li Chunling, 2001). Consequently, in research, some scholars emphasize the hierarchical nature of social class (e.g., Lu Xueyi, 2002), while others, even in quantitative research, do not treat social class as a continuous variable from high to low but merely examine it as a categorical variable (e.g., Zhang Yi, 2005). This reflects the difficulty of reaching unified consensus on the standard of “hierarchy” in terms of objective resource possession.

With the rise of social class psychology research, scholars oriented toward subjective class have begun to emphasize examining the effects of social class from a subjective perspective. Kraus et al. (2012, 2013) propose that the key reason why an individual's class has profound effects on human psychology lies in each person's perception of their relative social rank position. Therefore, social class psychology needs to focus on individuals' self-positioning of class at the subjective perception level. This subjective perception is based on social comparison, exists in a hierarchical or ladder-like representation with a top and bottom, and individuals can accurately assess their relative social rank position with others through class information displayed by others (e.g., Kraus et al., 2017). In short, regardless of how complex the composition of an individual's objective social class may be in terms of social resources, he or she will form a comprehensive, integrated feeling of their own class based on social comparison with themselves and others, with a certain hierarchical level. This is what Kraus et al. (2012, 2013) consider particularly worthy of psychological attention.

These viewpoints expand research attention to subjective class and provide theoretical justification for the feasibility of this orientation, which holds important value for the field. First, by emphasizing the “subjective” angle, the subjective class research orientation opens up new space for studying social class issues, and relevant scholars have increasingly recognized the unique value of studying the psychological effects of subjective class (e.g., Manstead, 2018). Second, by clarifying the connotation of “hierarchy,” this orientation logically introduces social class psychology research into the track of examining linear effects, which is a research approach more familiar to psychologists and has also promoted class measurement to some extent. Third, by revealing the source of “social comparison,” the construct of subjective class can comprehensively and intuitively reflect individuals’ generalized, averaged feelings about their possession of social resources. Moreover, this perception is not generated out of thin air but is a relatively rational cognitive result formed by people integrating their long-term social interactions and interpersonal comparisons, possessing certain realism and systematicity.

2.2 Conceptualization and Measurement

Based on the above theoretical considerations, the subjective class research orientation has also formed new understandings and definitions of the concept of social class. Before this orientation emerged, researchers’ conceptual definitions and quantitative measurements of individual social class were primarily based on objective class (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). However, the subjective class research orientation points out that a person’s social class includes both the objective social material resources they possess and their perception of their own rank status formed through comparison with others (e.g., Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead, 2018). This definition explicitly combines psychological factors with the definition of social class. Moreover, Kraus et al. (2012, 2013) further analyze the necessity of defining social class in this way, pointing out that social class psychology studies the impact of individuals’ social class on their psychology and behavior. The reason this impact occurs is largely because people’s perceived class level—that is, subjective class—plays a direct predictive role. Many studies have indeed supported Kraus and colleagues’ above assertions, finding that subjective class has stronger predictive effects than objective class when predicting many psychological and behavioral variables (e.g., Dietze & Knowles, 2016; Lee, 2018). Additionally, some studies have found that the predictive effect of objective class on certain outcome variables is mediated by subjective class (e.g., Chen Yanhong et al., 2014; Tan et al., 2020).

This perspective on conceptual definition naturally extends to the level of conceptual measurement. Based on the above premises, researchers tend to measure participants’ subjective class to reflect their social class level (see review in Yang Shenlong et al., 2020). The measurement of subjective class is generally simple. One commonly used method is to present participants with a 10-rung ladder (Adler et al., 2000), ask them to imagine it as a social class hierarchy that

comprehensively reflects people's income, occupational prestige, and education level, and then self-report which number corresponds to their perceived class. Compared with separately measuring the three components of objective class mentioned above, subjective class measurement can obtain participants' relatively intuitive class scores by having them directly report their integrated feelings about possessing economic, organizational, and cultural resources through guidance from the instructions. This is far simpler than measuring participants' income, occupational prestige, or education level.

Of course, the contribution of the class concept emphasized by the subjective class research orientation goes far beyond simplifying the measurement of participants' class. On the one hand, by incorporating the variable of subjective class into the concept of social class, it paves the way for subjective class as an operational definition of social class. On the other hand, because this research orientation emphasizes that the key component in how social class affects individual psychology is subjective class, later research has increasingly focused on examining participants' subjective class (e.g., Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016; Tan et al., 2020). Therefore, this orientation acts as a bridge connecting objective class, a sociological concept, with individual psychological behavior, a focus of psychology. The results show that many psychological behaviors can be predicted by social class. It is based on this that social class psychology has been able to emerge as a research field (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). This may be the more important value of this orientation.

2.3 Research Methods

Traditional social class research, which focused only on objective class, could only be based on correlational logic because an individual's objective class is difficult to change in a short period. Researchers could only measure an individual's objective class level and other psychological variables through questionnaires to examine their covariation relationships. The emergence of the subjective class research orientation changed this methodological limitation, enabling later research to directly examine the causal relationship between class and dependent variables by manipulating participants' subjective class. Manipulating participants' subjective class does not change their actual social class status; researchers only need to apply different manipulations to participants in different experimental groups to make some participants temporarily feel that their social class is relatively high and others feel that their class is relatively low (e.g., Yang Linchuan et al., 2017; Cheon & Hong, 2017; Chen et al., 2019). This allows analysis of the effects of social class on individual psychology and behavior from a causal perspective.

This methodological innovation by the subjective class research orientation is also of great significance for the field of social class psychology. Before this, research on the relationship between social class and individual psychology essentially only revealed correlational relationships. If social class and a psychological variable merely have a quantitative correlation without experimental evidence of

causality, at least two interpretations of their relationship are possible: either social class influences individual psychological outcomes, or individuals have certain psychological outcomes that lead them to their current class level. In terms of data results, both interpretations could be valid, but the latter interpretation actually does not concern the most important theoretical foundation of social class psychology—that an individual's class influences their psychological and behavioral performance (e.g., Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Manstead, 2018). Therefore, precisely because the subjective class research orientation creatively proposed that participants' subjective class could be manipulated through experimental methods, researchers could claim to have discovered causal relationships between class and certain psychological phenomena based on experimental designs. This represents an important theoretical breakthrough for the field of social class psychology.

2.4 Research Questions and Concerns

Based on the foundational work in theory, concept, and method, the breadth of research questions addressed in the field of social class psychology has also expanded. In summary, among the current research in this field, at least three important topics are related to the subjective class research orientation.

The first topic is examining the psychological effects of class experience. In short, such research uses subjective class as the independent variable but no longer emphasizes that subjective class in the research is merely an indicator reflecting class; instead, it emphasizes that the research is simply exploring the effects of this subjective class experience itself (e.g., Chan & Zlatevska, 2019; Cheon & Hong, 2017; Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016). This has made the study of the psychological effects of class experience an increasingly independent new topic. Some studies have indeed found that subjective class and objective class even show opposite effects when predicting some dependent variables (e.g., perception of system justice) (e.g., Buchel et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020). More studies have shown that while the predictive effect of objective class remains controversial, the predictive effect of subjective class is relatively stable and consistent (Yang et al., 2019). This seems to further demonstrate that subjective class experience has unique research value distinct from objective class.

The second topic is the influence of individuals' perception of others' class information—that is, class signals—on individual psychology and behavior. Class signals refer to carriers that can display and convey an individual's social class information. For example, certain clothing styles and lifestyles are often considered typical characteristics of high-class or low-class individuals (e.g., Kraus et al., 2017). Research has also found that participants can make relatively accurate assessments of strangers' class level through clothing (e.g., Berger, 2017), facial appearance (e.g., Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017), and speech patterns (e.g., Kraus et al., 2019). Based on these foundations, the class issues concerned by the subjective class research orientation extend from “self” to “others,” and researchers have begun to extensively examine how participants' perceived class

signals of others affect participants' own social comparison and interpersonal interactions (Guo Rong & Fu Xinyuan, 2019).

The third topic is research on the subjective perception of class mobility. An individual's social class has both relative stability and relative mobility. Since stable, static social class can be divided into subjective and objective dimensions, class mobility can also be at the subjective level based on this subjective class research orientation. Therefore, individuals' perception and prediction of class mobility at the subjective level—also called subjective class mobility—has become a variable of concern in social class psychology (e.g., Oishi et al., 2019). Researchers have not only examined participants' subjective perception of their own past class mobility (e.g., Chan, 2018) but also their subjective expectations of future class mobility for themselves or their next generation (e.g., Shariff et al., 2016). Many studies have also examined participants' subjective perception of whether overall class mobility in their social system is smooth (e.g., Day & Fiske, 2017; Huang et al., 2017). These different levels of subjective class mobility perception have been found to significantly predict participants' evaluation of social justice (e.g., Sagioglou et al., 2019), attitudes toward social policies (e.g., Alesina et al., 2018), and social participation (e.g., Tan et al., 2021), demonstrating unique research value.

In summary, by introducing the perspective of subjective perception into social class psychology, this subjective orientation has enabled researchers to develop new understandings of both the theoretical discussion and conceptual definition of social class. On this basis, new research methods and questions have also been developed. To date, research in this field has discovered a large number of conclusions showing the profound impact of social class on various aspects of an individual. Behind this series of research advances, the important foundational value of the subjective class research orientation cannot be ignored.

3. Drawbacks of the Subjective Class Research Orientation

However, while affirming the above four aspects of contributions of the subjective class research orientation, it should be noted that the proposal of this approach has also brought certain negative effects. The following discussion will examine the drawbacks of this orientation from the same four aspects: theoretical foundation, conceptual measurement, research methods, and research concerns.

3.1 Theoretical Foundation

The subjective class research orientation clarifies the subjective meaning of social class for individuals, emphasizing the examination of the effects of social class on individual psychology and behavior by studying people's hierarchical perception of their own class. However, it should be noted that this theoretical orientation to some extent causes some psychological research to lack in-depth theoretical understanding of the complex social reality of social class, narrowly

and simplistically viewing it merely as a hierarchical numerical continuum. This point is worthy of theoretical discussion in both psychological and sociological discourse systems.

First, from a purely psychological perspective, the subjective class research orientation may have the problem of understanding social class in an overly one-sided manner. For example, Stephens and Townsend (2013) disagree with understanding social class solely in terms of the dimension of hierarchy. They point out that social class for individuals is more of a cultural background. Individuals exposed to class-specific cultural environments for long periods develop psychological and behavioral patterns with their own class characteristics. These long-term cultural experiences are far from what a single rank or ladder can reflect (e.g., Stephens et al., 2014). The subjective class research orientation's simplification of this into a perception of one's own rank is inevitably overly flattened. For example, for a naive primary school student who may not yet clearly understand his or her own rank on the social ladder, the education they receive, the material and cultural resources they access, and the social environment they interact with daily are already sufficient to equip them with a preliminary cultural-psychological system based on a particular class, which will manifest in specific self-perceptions, concepts, and behaviors. This suggests that the impact of class on individuals may lie more in cultural shaping than in hierarchical perception.

Furthermore, when combined with a sociological perspective, the subjective class research orientation reveals a certain degree of disconnection from macro-social reality. Of course, the subjective class research orientation was proposed by psychology researchers, so it inevitably inherits psychology's focus on micro-level, individual perspectives. However, if it could further incorporate sociological macro-level thinking, it might better reflect its practical value. The prominent manifestation of this issue at the theoretical level is that psychology and sociology have different theoretical positions on the construct of subjective class. Psychology research (based on the subjective class research orientation) usually treats subjective class only as an individual difference variable, similar to demographic or personality variables, existing as a scale for dividing populations. Sociology, however, not only examines subjective class in this way (e.g., Tan Xuyun et al., 2020) but also often treats it as a reflection of public social mentality, paying more attention to the causes and influencing factors of people's subjective class, thereby revealing specific social mentality phenomena of particular groups in the context of social stratification. For example, Wang Junxiu's (2018a) research examined respondents' subjective class scores using a ten-point scale from 1 to 10 and found that the average subjective class score of the sample was only 4.46, thus suggesting that the Chinese public generally underestimates their own class and that a mentality of vulnerability may be widespread. Additionally, many sociological studies have examined what factors, besides objective class, influence the formation of people's subjective class, finding that housing conditions (e.g., Zhang Haidong & Yang Chengcheng, 2017), family factors (e.g., Xu Qi, 2018), and even urban-rural household registration (Wang

Jun, 2021) all influence people' s subjective class perception. This sociological theoretical positioning and thinking perspective is worthy of reference for the psychology-based subjective class research orientation.

3.2 Conceptualization and Measurement

Due to the theoretical orientation' s neglect of objective class and social reality, the subjective class research orientation also shows an obvious tendency of "emphasizing the subjective while neglecting the objective" in conceptual measurement. That is, many current studies in social class psychology tend to examine the effects of subjective class while relatively neglecting objective class. For example, some studies not only use subjective class as the operational definition of social class but also treat objective class as a covariate to be statistically controlled when examining the predictive effect of subjective class on a certain psychological variable (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015). This approach carries significant conceptual risks. Although on the surface, controlling for objective class seems to allow observation of the "independent" predictive effect of subjective class, in essence, after adding control variables, the conceptual components of subjective class have actually changed. Therefore, data analysis results based on this statistical control cannot completely be said to reflect the effect of subjective class (e.g., Becker et al., 2016; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Spector & Brannick, 2011). Of course, this does not mean that the practice of using control variables is necessarily incorrect, but the key is to objectively select variable relationship hypothesis models and interpret research results based on the statistical meaning of control variables, rather than generally discussing how the effect of subjective class is.

Additionally, it is worth noting that many studies have found that the correlation between subjective class and objective class is not high (e.g., Tan et al., 2020), which has also drawn some scholars' attention to the concept of class identification bias. Class identification bias refers to the phenomenon and degree of inconsistency between an individual' s objective class level and subjective class level (Fan Xiaoguang & Chen Yunsong, 2015). In objective social existence, everyone has an objective social class level to which they belong, while simultaneously having a self-perceived subjective social class perception. Their subjective class is formed to some extent based on objective class but cannot absolutely accurately reflect the level of their objective class. In other words, only part of an individual' s subjective class corresponds to and matches their objective class, while another part is the component that does not correspond to objective class—that is, class identification bias. Regarding this, on the one hand, researchers can specifically examine class identification bias as a construct or variable with predictive effects. On the other hand, they should also strive to uncover the causes of class identification bias—that is, examine the roots of the inconsistency between subjective and objective class. The subjective class research orientation often neglects these aspects.

Based on current research, class identification bias may stem from at least the fol-

lowing reasons. First, different people rely on different standards when forming their perception of their own subjective class. For example, for different occupational groups, some may rely more on economic factors for self-class positioning while others may focus more on cultural factors, or some may pay more attention to the family level while others focus more on the individual level. This makes the source standards for subjective class inconsistent, and different standards also bring different predictive effects (e.g., Xu Qi, 2018). Second, subjective class is determined not only by an individual's own objective resource level but also by social comparison. Therefore, differences in reference objects and living environments can completely lead to different subjective class assessments. Especially for individuals whose own class has experienced vertical mobility, their subjective class scores show certain shifts as their frame of reference changes (Destin et al., 2017; Zhang Shun & Liang Fang, 2021). Additionally, research has shown that the indicators people consider when evaluating their own class differ across eras and races (Cohen et al., 2017). All this demonstrates the limitations and instability of people's self-class assessment.

In summary, although the measurement of subjective class is relatively simple and straightforward, individuals' ratings of their own subjective social class are actually influenced by many aspects, making this score highly situational, variable, and uncertain in its standards, and may even be far from an individual's real class status. This suggests that if we only use subjective class to represent the effect of general social class in conceptual measurement, the conclusions may harbor limitations and risks.

3.3 Research Methods

The aforementioned drawbacks in conceptual measurement naturally also affect experimental manipulation targeting subjective class. In fact, in the series of articles by Kraus et al. (2012, 2013), although they strongly emphasized the component of subjective class, they did not deny objective class. They suggested that an individual's social class could be "subjective class + objective class" but did not describe it as "subjective class or objective class." In many representative studies in this field in recent years (e.g., Bai Jie et al., 2021; Wei Qingwang et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2022), researchers usually adopt both objective and subjective class operational definitions in their studies, examining the effects of both to draw research conclusions.

If measured against this conceptual definition of "subjective class + objective class," it can be inferred that research based on subjective class manipulation cannot fully represent the entire connotation of the social class concept. Under this operational approach, an individual's objective class does not change at all; what actually changes is only the individual's subjective class experience. Therefore, for research using subjective class manipulation to explore the effects of social class, researchers might more appropriately treat it as an auxiliary research method, more suitable for inclusion as an individual sub-study within

a series of studies. Some articles based on only a single study manipulating subjective class draw conclusions that amplify the results as effects of social class (e.g., Jetten et al., 2017), which seems somewhat hasty. Of course, in some studies, if researchers manipulate not participants' subjective class but the class signals they perceive from others (e.g., Batruch et al., 2017; Van Doesum et al., 2017), drawing such conclusions is unobjectionable. Additionally, some studies (e.g., Cheon & Hong, 2017) although using only subjective class manipulation as the operational definition, only discuss the effects of subjective class experience when drawing conclusions without amplifying the conclusions to effects of social class, which is certainly acceptable. Besides, when manipulating subjective class, researchers should also pay attention to controlling the influence of other extraneous variables as much as possible, because when priming participants to form different self-class feelings, other changes in social emotions and social cognition may also be triggered, such as positive and negative emotions and relative deprivation. In past experimental designs manipulating subjective class, researchers have relatively neglected attention to and control of these factors. Future research may need to focus on and measure these aspects to minimize the interference effects of extraneous variables on research results.

3.4 Research Questions and Concerns

In terms of research questions, the emergence of the subjective class research orientation has undoubtedly expanded the scope of research questions in social class psychology. However, from another perspective, because the vast majority of studies focus on subjectively perceived social class, it seems to make the issue of social class lose its original diversified and complex characteristics in real society, becoming more simply a comparison between “high class” and “low class.” This research orientation is reflected in specific question examinations, where the vast majority of social class psychology studies, whether based on correlational or experimental methods, ultimately only reveal differences between so-called high-class and low-class individuals.

Of course, examining differences between high and low classes is one of the most basic issues in social class psychology, and the high-low binary design is most conducive to intuitively revealing problems, which is understandable. However, research should be multi-oriented, and other understandings of social class should also be valued. If we set aside the subjective class research orientation and return to traditional questions focusing on objective class, we will find that social class in the objective world may not be unidimensional, nor is it as simple as a binary differentiation between high and low class. Generally speaking, an individual's social class derives from three components: organizational (political) resources, economic resources, and cultural resources (e.g., Loignon & Woehr, 2018). Precisely, some groups do not have an “all-or-nothing” resource possession but only have advantages in one aspect of resources. For example, some relocated households or individual industrial and commercial households may be relatively high in economic resources but lack organizational and cultural

resources. Some highly educated groups possess certain cultural resources but may be temporarily relatively lacking in economic resources. Another example is the relatively new group that has emerged in recent years, “new social class members,” referring to new middle-class individuals outside the system. They are not within the traditional sense of the system and are also significantly different from the so-called “old middle class,” that is, individual industrial and commercial households, small business owners, and self-employed individuals with small property (Li Chunling, 2017). Such complex social labels are really difficult to define using only “high class” or “low class.” However, this population is also relatively large, and their political mentality and social behavior are also psychological issues worth attention (Wang Junxiu, 2018b).

Furthermore, psychology researchers sometimes rarely attempt to examine the subjective class research orientation within a broader social background to reveal contemporary issues in current social development. However, if we can more comprehensively consider subjective class, objective class, and current social problems, we can often obtain more practically significant research results. For example, some studies have found that overall, lower-class individuals support wealth redistribution policies more than higher-class individuals, and the predictive effect of subjective class is more significant than that of objective class (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Bai Jie et al., 2021). Generally speaking, research can at least form certain conclusions at this point. However, behind this conclusion, why the predictive effect of objective class on redistribution support is not significant—this question still has space for further in-depth exploration and attention to real contradictions (Zeng Zhaoxie et al., 2022). Further research has found that some individuals with relatively low objective class also reject redistribution policies (Li Ying & Lü Guangming, 2019). A possible explanation for this is that domestic scholars have found that a considerable portion of objectively low-class individuals overestimate their own conditions when forming their subjective class perception (Fan Xiaoguang & Chen Yunsong, 2015). Similar foreign research has found that low-income individuals often overestimate their income rank in the population, which in turn makes them less willing to vote in support of social policies that promote equality (Jackson & Payne, 2021). Through such in-depth analysis, we can see that when subjective class, objective class, and social reality are comprehensively considered, more practically valuable discoveries may emerge. Of course, this bias between subjective class self-assessment and objective class reality does not only exist among low-class individuals; high-class individuals sometimes also show downward identification bias (Wang Junxiu, 2018a), and socioeconomic inequality further intensifies people’s vulnerable class identification (Li Jun, 2021), leading to status anxiety and educational anxiety among middle-income groups (Gao Shuguo, 2022; Lü Qingchun, 2020). These studies allow us to see that the subjective class research orientation can serve not only as an operational definition method and means of quantifying individual class but should also become a major theme for understanding real social stratification and social contradictions, helping future research better answer and respond to current hot issues by examining the

public' s subjective class-related conditions.

4. Conclusion and Future Directions

The above discussion has introduced and analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of the subjective class research orientation in social class psychology. The subjective class research orientation emphasizes studying the effects of individual social class from the perspective of subjective cognition, highlighting the unique research value of the subjective class concept distinct from objective class. It has also done important foundational work in conceptual definition and quantification, laying the groundwork for the emergence of social class psychology. At the same time, this orientation has made innovative contributions in research methods and questions. However, its rise has also caused many researchers to excessively neglect the examination of objective class in their studies, highlighting only the unidimensional, hierarchical characteristics of subjective class. This not only may cause certain conceptual biases at the operational level but also makes the research approach overly individualistic and micro-level, making it difficult to reflect the complexity and macro-level issues of different classes in real society.

To further leverage the advantages of this orientation and compensate for its exposed deficiencies, future research may consider in-depth exploration in the following areas. First, basic research can be conducted to further clarify the relationship between objective and subjective classes and their different effects in predicting some psychological and behavioral variables. Some researchers (Li et al., 2020) have found that subjective class and objective class not only have a moderate-to-low correlation but also have different or even opposite effects when predicting some social psychological variables (such as expectations for class mobility), thus considering them to be two variables that are somewhat related yet somewhat independent. By separately examining objective and subjective classes, they found opposite effects of the two in predicting dependent variables. Other research has found that the different predictive effects of subjective and objective classes on dependent variables may also be related to cultural factors: for American participants, subjective class shows a more significant predictive power for anger than objective class; while for Japanese participants, objective class shows a stronger correlation with anger (Park et al., 2013). This may be because American individualistic culture emphasizes self-feelings, and the individual self is more related to subjective class; while Japanese collectivistic culture emphasizes the relationship between individuals and groups, making the objective class variable, which can better reflect macro-level group factors, show stronger predictive effects. Of course, current research results in this area still need further improvement, but more basic research of this kind should be conducted in the future to more comprehensively reveal the corresponding relationships and different effects of objective and subjective classes.

Second, in terms of research design, future studies should explore more detailed and comprehensive methodological innovations to deeply demonstrate the

unique research value of subjective class in the field of social class psychology. For example, regarding the concept of the inconsistency between individuals' subjective and objective class—that is, class identification bias—it is necessary to conduct research on effective measurement and its antecedents and consequences. Sociology research in this area already has specific algorithms that can be borrowed by psychology research (Fan Xiaoguang & Chen Yunsong, 2015). For another example, regarding the measurement of subjective class alone, individuals may form different self-perceptions of class based on occupation, income, and education level. Perhaps different measurement methods can be attempted (such as separately asking participants about three different subjective classes formed based on income, education level, and occupational social comparison results) to distinguish different subjective class scores and examine these more subtle class effects. Additionally, based on the basic theoretical perspective of social class psychology—that objective class influences people's psychology and behavior through subjective class (Kraus et al., 2013; Manstead, 2018)—future research examining the predictive effect of social class on a certain psychology can assume a mediation model where objective class is the independent variable, subjective class is the mediating variable, and psychological or behavioral tendencies are the dependent variable. This design may more intuitively examine the relationships between variables. Although there are currently few empirical studies based on this theoretical framework (e.g., Chen Yanhong et al., 2014; Tan et al., 2020), similar ideas and hypotheses may be considered more in future research.

Finally, research in this field needs to consider more integration with social reality, explore diversified social class issues in current social structures, and change the current research status quo of simply making “high-low” binary divisions of class. For example, the aforementioned new social class members, as well as specific groups such as relatively poor populations in underdeveloped areas, college graduates and graduate students facing employment difficulties, or middle-aged people who have joined the middle class but still hold a vulnerable mentality—these specific populations in real society have psychological manifestations representing their unique mentality and demands that may not be fully revealed by research based solely on the subjective class research orientation. Currently, some research has begun to focus on these real class groups (e.g., Fu Anguo et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020). However, overall, psychology may need to refer more to sociological research perspectives in terms of real-world concern. To a certain extent, the deficiency of the subjective class research orientation lies in its lack of interdisciplinary dialogue. As Huang Zihang et al. (2021) point out, in research on social psychological issues, although psychology-based research emphasizes scientific quantification and clear operationalization, it needs to strengthen reference to sociological research to reflect social reality. Future research focusing on subjective class may increase investment in this area to better reflect the theoretical and practical value of social class psychology in social governance.

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