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Best Practices in Conceptualizing and Measuring Social Class in Psychological Research

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An extensive body of research has documented the relation between social class, as indexed by socioeconomic status (SES) and subjective social status (SSS), and a host of outcomes, including physical and mental health, academic achievement, and educational attainment. Yet, there remains ambiguity regarding how best to conceptualize and measure social class. This article clarifies definitional and measurement issues related to the assessment of SES and SSS, addresses their importance and relevance for psychological research, and reviews best practices

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with regard to measurement and assessment. We conclude by discussing the integration of social class with other markers of social position to promote the advancement of psychological science.

Radical changes to the economic climate in the United States in recent years make it imperative that psychologists pay greater and more sustained attention to the role of social class in people's lives. Throughout these trying economic times, economic disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" continue to widen, with wealth increasingly concentrated among the top 1–2% of the U.S. population (Wolff, 2010). The number of people living in poverty has risen from 33 million in 2005 to more than 46 million in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Additionally, unemployment rates remain high (approximately 8–9%), underemployment continues to plague many of those who are employed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), and home foreclosures remain a grim reality for many Americans (Mortgage Bankers Association, 2010). Such statistics are sobering, cast a spotlight on longstanding socioeconomic disparities in the United States, and demonstrate the relevance of social class and poverty in the lives of an increasing majority of people in the United States—and by extension, for psychology (Bullock & Lott, 2001; Smith, 2010; Williams, 2009).

Psychology has only recently started incorporating social class and exploring its economic and psychological dimensions, despite long histories of attention to social class in other social sciences, such as sociology, economics, and allied disciplines (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007). This nascent attention has begun to deepen and broaden psychological understanding of how social-cultural-economic stratification and inequality operate in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and larger systems (Liu et al., 2004). Despite these advances and increasing evidence of the relevance of social class to psychology, lack of conceptual clarity and consensus regarding social class measurement, inattention to its importance, and limited social class-related training provided in doctoral preparation have significantly hampered psychology's capacity to integrate social class into our research (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007; Stabb & Reimers, in press; Williams, 2009).

Even when social class is measured in psychological studies, it is often relegated to a control variable, instead of explicitly examined as a key study variable or tested as a moderator or mediator of predictive relationships (Evans, 2004; Liu et al., 2004). This practice is problematic because whereas controlling for social class may yield less biased estimates, it does not address whether the nature of the relationships or mechanisms among the study variables are mediated or moderated by social class. Problems are also evident with research design, such as when inadequate attention is given to the social class backgrounds of participants or institutions (e.g., schools), leading to the omission of potentially important

variation and an inability to assess for class-related differences among study constructs (Duncan & Magnuson, 2003). In short, psychologists often pay little heed to social class when formulating theoretical models, conceptualizing studies, selecting measurement tools, and analyzing data (APA Task Force on SES, 2007; Bullock & Lott, 2001). Further, extant scholarship (Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998; Smith, 2010) has begun to articulate how social class is linked to key psychological domains, but has not provided clear guidelines for the measurement of social class in psychological science.

As such, the central objective of this article is to enhance psychologists' capacity to conceptualize and measure social class in their research. To accomplish this objective, we highlight best practices in and offer concrete guidance regarding social class measurement. To illustrate the significance of improved social class measurement, we very briefly review how social class affects key domains in psychology (i.e., physical and mental health, educational and career outcomes) and address the complexities inherent in social class measurement. We conclude by considering how social class intersects with other markers of social position, such as gender, race, and ethnicity, and how attention to these intersections further informs psychological science. Before delving into these issues, we first define social class and review two of the most common approaches taken to measure it.

What Is Social Class?

While the terms social class, stratification, socioeconomic status, and socioeconomic position are often used interchangeably, each represents a distinct approach to capturing an important aspect of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. As such, it is not surprising that substantial debate exists regarding which term should be used, when, and as applied to whom (APA Task Force on SES, 2007). Here we return to the phenomenon's scholarly roots in sociology (e.g., Weber, 1922) and designate "social class" as the higher order construct representing an individual or group's relative position in an economic-social-cultural hierarchy. We define social class as denoting power, prestige, and control over resources and focus on the two most prominent ways that psychologists have conceptualized and measured aspects of social class. The first approach, socioeconomic status (SES), indexes one's position within a power hierarchy via relatively objective indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources, such as income, wealth, education level, and occupational prestige (Diemer & Ali, 2009). The other major approach, subjective social status (SSS), is typically measured by one's perception of his or her social class, using more qualitative and relatively subjective approaches (Liu et al., 2004). Tables 1 through 3 reflect this organization, and provide examples of how social class is typically measured in the social science literature.

An (Overly) Brief Review: Social Class and Key Psychological Domains

Scholars have established linkages between social class and a variety of important psychological domains, including but not limited to: mental health disorders in children (Evans, 2004) and adults (Lund et al., 2010), substance abuse (Luthar, 2003), physical health (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Guralnik, Butterworth, Wadsworth, & Kuh, 2006), obesity (Zhang & Wang, 2004), brain architecture (Raizada & Kishiyama, 2010; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009), toxin and pollutant exposure (Bullard & Wright, 2003), age of asthma onset (Chen, Martin, & Matthews, 2006), hostile familial interactions (Williams, Conger, & Blozis, 2007), academic preparation at school entry (Lee & Burkam, 2002), parental efforts to ensure their children's school success (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Lareau, 2003; Magnuson, 2007), attending schools with higher-achieving peers (Crosnoe, 2009), academic achievement (Conley, 1999; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Yeung & Conley, 2008), post-secondary attainment (Adelman, 2004; Conley, 2001; Diemer & Li, 2012), career development (Diemer & Ali, 2009), and occupational attainment (Blustein, 2006).

Given the scope of these findings, a comprehensive review of the social class literature is beyond the scope of this article. A literature this vast would be difficult to comprehensively review within the confines of any single paper, much less one focused on measurement recommendations. Further, although scholars have reached consensus on some of the theoretical mechanisms by which social class operates within each of these domains, many of these mechanisms are under considerable debate (i.e., the social causation vs. social selection vs. interactionist perspectives; Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1997; Rowe & Rodgers, 1997). These mechanisms and controversies are also not given consideration here, given that our primary objective is to provide concrete guidance regarding the conceptualization and measurement of social class. Instead, this overly brief review illustrates the importance of social class in disparate psychological processes and highlights some of the key findings within each of these domains. Having established the importance of social class in psychological scholarship, we turn now to considering how to conceptualize and measure social class in psychological research.

Best Practices for Measuring Social Class in Psychological Research

Tables 1 through 3 provide detailed guidance regarding best practices in conceptualizing and measuring SES and SSS. In reviewing the multiple indicators of social class listed in Tables 1 through 3, it is important to keep in mind the complexities in measuring social class, as well as the fact that using different indicators of social class to study the same phenomena may yield different conclusions.

Measuring SES

As shown in Table 1, indicators of SES generally cluster around two domains—prestige and resources. Prestige-based assessments capture social stratification and an individual's relative social-political-economic standing, and are typically measured using occupational prestige indices such as Duncan's Socioeconomic Index (SEI). Resource-based measures include income, wealth, and educational credentials, as well as the lack of such resources, such as markers of poverty (e.g., public assistance) and material deprivation (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997). Because of the large number of resource-based measures, we discuss them separately. Table 1 encompasses occupational prestige, educational attainment, income, labor market earnings, and wealth; Table 2 provides detailed descriptions of measures of absolute and relative poverty, as well as material hardship. Although the various SES indicators presented in Tables 1 and 2 are correlated, each has also been shown to measure distinct components of social position (Duncan & Magnuson, 2003) that are differentially associated with disparate outcomes (e.g., Bornstein, Hahn, Suwalsky, & Haynes, 2003; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008). Thus, it is key that researchers determine a priori the most appropriate and meaningful measure(s) of SES for their particular purpose and study population. To help with that decision-making, we include information in the tables about the intended population and typical use for each measure.

Measuring Occupational Prestige, Educational Attainment, Income, and Wealth

Occupational prestige, educational attainment, and income can be considered the "triumvirate" of SES indicators and are extensively used in social science research. Of these, psychologists are most apt to assess educational attainment and occupational prestige whereas sociologists and economists have traditionally relied more heavily on indicators of economic resources, such as income, earnings, and wealth (Duncan & Magnuson, 2003).

Occupational prestige indices rely on societal perceptions regarding the prestige of occupations and are therefore only robust measures of SES with adults who have been firmly entrenched in the labor market. Best practices in measuring occupational prestige are detailed in Table 1. People hold relatively stable and convergent perceptions regarding the prestige of occupations that have been rank-ordered in occupational prestige measures. For example, the Nakao and Treas (1994) Socioeconomic Index ranks the prestige of occupational titles from the Census on a 1–100 scale, drawing on the 1989 General Social Survey. To measure occupational prestige, researchers should ask participants to indicate their current or most recent primary occupation and to briefly describe the characteristics of and responsibilities associated with that occupation. This supporting information can be used to classify occupational titles that are unclear or uninformative.

Table 1. Measurement of Socioeconomic Status (SES) in Psychological Research: Best Practices and Recommendations

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
			Prestige-Based Measures: Capture social stratification and an individual's relative social-political-economic standing	
Occupational Prestige	SR (see table note)	Information can be assessed at an individual (I) level—that is, asked of all eligible individuals in the household or family, or aggregated to a household (H) level—whereby either the highest occupational prestige score is included for analysis purposes or the two are averaged.	Measures of occupational attainment typically ask participants to indicate their current or most recent occupation, using an open-ended prompt, and to also provide additional details regarding that occupation. These open-ended responses are then classified into occupational categories, according to resources such as the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) or Census classification systems, using the supporting details provided by participants to guide the classification process. Examples: (1) Currently, what is your main occupation or job? Please be specific. If you are a secretary, also indicate the type of business; if you are in retail, indicate what you sell; if you work in child care, indicate the age group of the children you are responsible for, etc. [Adapted from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Survey, or MADICS. See: http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/pgc/home.htm] (2) I would like you to answer the following questions for your primary or most important job. For your primary job, what is your job title? IF NOT CURRENTLY EMPLOYED, BUT FORMERLY EMPLOYED: What was your job title? What (do/did) you do as a/an (job title)? [Adapted from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, or NELS. See: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88/index.asp]	Recommended for use with adult populations with ties to the formal labor market. Best when used with large and occupationally diverse samples. Restriction of range when used with limited samples (e.g., all low-income families). Not recommended for measuring the occupational prestige of youth or people whose occupational attainment is not yet established (i.e., college students who are working part-time). For these groups, measuring the occupational prestige of their parents is more appropriate. Predominantly used by researchers.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
Prestige-Based Measures: Capture social stratification and an individual's relative social-political-economic standing				
			(3) Alternatively, participants are asked to indicate which category, from a list of occupational categories, is the best match for their current or most recent occupation. For example, participants in the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) are asked to indicate which of 26 occupational categories, derived from the Census (i.e., construction, financial services) matches their current or most recent occupation. See: http://psidonline.isr.umich.edu/default.aspx These nominal occupational classifications are then cross-walked to numerical indices of occupational prestige (see: Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Ali, 2009), such as the following examples. Examples: *Nakao & Treas (1994)*—Based on laypersons' subjective perceptions of occupational prestige for over 1,000 occupations listed in the Census classification sys tem. *Duncan's Socioeconomic Index (SEI)*—Based on occupational prestige, education, and income. Extends National Opinion Research Center (NORC) occupational prestige scores (based on 90 occupations) to close to 500 occupations (Miller & Salkind, 2002).	

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
			Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)	
Educational Attainment	SR AR (as in when the information is gathered from school or college/ university records	I, H (same as above)	Typically measured as: (1) Continuous—number of years completed schooling / highest grade or year of school completed [e.g., 0 = No formal schooling, 1 = 1st grade . . . ..12 = 12th grade but not diploma, 13 = High School diploma . . . 18 = Bachelor's degree . . . 22 Professional degree after Bachelor's (MD; DDS; JD, LLB; etc.)]. (2) Categorical—credentials [i.e., 0 = did not complete high school, 1 = GED, 2 = high school diploma, 3 = postsecondary vocational certificate, 4 = associate's degree, 5 = bachelor's degree, 6 = master's degree, 7 = doctoral degree (Ph.D., JD., MD)]. See: Adelman (1999); Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009); Diemer and Li (2012) Educational attainment questions are generally scaled on the U.S. schooling structure. When used with non-native populations, researchers will need to modify the response anchors to match the schooling structure in participants' country of origin (and assess the degree of comparability between education level in the country of origin and the United States).	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of adult population. It is recommended that information be collected directly from the target individual (e.g., parent). However, in instances where study participants are youth, youth reports of parent educational attainment are a good indicator of SES, as these reports tend to be less biased than youth reports of household income, wealth, or parental occupational prestige. Predominantly used by researchers.
Total Family Income	SR	H	"... sum of income from all sources received by all members of the household over some time period, typically the calendar year or month prior to the interview." (Duncan & Petersen, 2001, p. 249). Sources typically include earnings, public assistance, unemployment benefits, alimony, pensions, and interest. Examples: (1) (INTERVIEW FORMAT): What was the total combined income of all members of this family in YEAR? Please	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of the adult population. Identifying most appropriate person in the household to answer question(s) is critical. We do not recommend asking youth to report on family income.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)				
			include money from jobs, net income from business, farm or rent, pensions, dividends, welfare, social security payments and any other money income received by you or any other family member. $ _____ IN YEAR IF DON'T KNOW OR REFUSED: Would it amount to $50,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $100,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $150,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $30,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $20,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $40,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $10,000 or more? See: Duncan & Petersen, 2001, p. 252	Useful for research, policy, and practice purposes. See also poverty measures discussed in Table 2.
			(2) (SELF-ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRE): Please check the category that tells us your approximate **total family** income for YEAR. *Consider all sources of income, including earnings, welfare cash assistance, child support alimonies, support from other members of your household who regularly contribute to your household, etc.* _____ Less than $10,000 _____ $10,001 to $15,000 _____ $15,001 to $25,000 _____ $25,001 to $50,000 _____$50,001 to $75,000 _____$75,001 to $100,000 _____$100,001 to $150,000 _____ more than $750,000. See: Mistry et al. (2012)	

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
			Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)	
Labor Market Earnings	SR	I	"... sum of income an individual receives from an employer or from all employers over some time period, typically the calendar year or month prior to the interview." (Duncan & Petersen, 2001, p. 250). Examples: (1) Are you salaried on your job, paid by the hour, or what? IF SALARIED, How much is your salary, before taxes and other deductions? $_____ PER _____. How many hours do you usually work for that salary? HOURS_____ PER _____. IF HOURLY, What is your hourly work rate for regular work time? $ _____ PER HOUR _____. What is your hourly wage rate for overtime? $_____ PER HOUR _____ . How many hours do you usually work per week? IF OTHER, About how much do you earn before taxes and other deductions? $ ____ PER _____. How many hours do you usually work for that? HOURS _____ PER _____. (Duncan & Petersen, 2001, p. 252) (2) How much did (name/you) earn from all employers, before taxes and other deductions during YEAR? $ _____ IN YEAR. IF DON'T KNOW OR REFUSED: Would it amount to $25,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $50,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $75,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $10,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $20,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $5,000 or more? See: Duncan & Petersen (2001)	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of the adult population. Specificity of the questions—salaried vs. hourly wages, queries about overtime—should be tailored to population of interest. Multiple options (e.g., salaried and hourly) are useful when used with heterogeneous populations. Useful for research and policy purposes.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)				
Wealth	SR	H	Roughly, assets minus debts. Refers to accumulated assets through inheritance, investment, and savings. Examples of assets include: home and car ownership, businesses, mutual funds, stocks and bonds, retirement investments, and bank accounts (e.g., checking, savings, certificates of deposit. Examples of debts include: credit card charges, student loans, medical/legal bills, loans from friends/relatives, mortgage debt (Conley, 1999; Duncan & Petersen, 2001; Yeung, & Conley, 2008). Examples: (1) (INTERVIEW; HOUSING ONLY): Do you (or anyone else in your family living there) own the (home/apartment), pay rent, or what? IF HOME/APT. IS OWNED, Could you tell me what the present value of your (house/apartment) is—I mean about how much would it bring if you sold it today?__$ IF DON'T KNOW OR REFUSED: Would it amount to $100,000 or more? IF YES: Would it amount to $300,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $50,000 or more? Do you have a mortgage on this property? IF YES: About how much is still owed on the mortgage? $_____ IF DON'T KNOW OR REFUSED: Would it amount to $50,000 or more?	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of the adult population. Specificity of the questions—investments, home ownership, etc.—should be tailored to population of interest. Provides a more comprehensive and multigenerational assessment of a person or family's economic resources. Useful for research and policy purposes.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
			Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)	
			IF YES: Would it amount to $150,000 or more? IF NO: Would it amount to $5,000 or more? (2) Standard wealth measures may not be as relevant for low-SES households, who generally have few assets. The following questions are more appropriate for assessing wealth among lower-SES households (adapted from Duncan et al., 2007): Do you have . . . . Answer YES/NO a. A monthly budget for managing your money? b. Money set aside in case of an emergency? c. Checking account at a bank or a credit union? d. A savings account? e. Place where you cash checks, other than a bank? f. A credit card, such as a Visa or MasterCard? g. Loan from a bank/credit union, such as for a car? h. A car, truck, or other vehicle? i. Cable or satellite dish TV at home? Do you and your family . . . (a) Own your home (b) Rent your home (c) Live with family or friends and not pay rent (d) Live with family/friends; contribute part of rent (e) Live in a group shelter, or, (f) Live in some other housing arrangement? (Specify) For approximately how long have you owned your home? — YEARS OR ___ MONTHS Do you currently have a mortgage on this property?	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Socioeconomic Status: Objective and quantifiable indicators of power, prestige, and control over resources. Includes prestige- and resource-based measures (Kreiger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).				
Resource-Based Measures: Includes income, wealth, and educational credentials, and lack of such resources (e.g., poverty, material deprivation)				
			IF YES: Altogether, what is your monthly mortgage payment, including home insurance and property taxes if included in your payment? About how much do you still owe on the mortgage? Do you think the balance is . . . (a) Less than $25,000 (b) More $25,000 but less than $50,000 (c) More than $50,000 but less than $75,000 (d) More than $75,000 but less than $100,000 (adjust scale accordingly)	
SES Composite Scores	SR	I H	Composite score derived from income, education, and occupational prestige of primary household earner(s). Examples: *Hollingshead Index of Social Position*—Two-factor index is composed to an occupational scale and an educational scale. The 7-point occupational scale ranks professions and businesses into groups and by size and value. Educational scale includes 7 positions, from graduate professional training to less than 7 years of school. A composite score is derived by summing the weighted values of the two factors; occupational scores are weighted more heavily than the educational scores (Miller & Salkind, 2002). *Nam-Powers Socioeconomic Status Score (NPSSS)*—Multiple-item measure based on average scores of SES components (i.e., occupation, education, and income (Krieger et al., 1997; Miller & Salkind, 2002)	Can be used with broad spectrum of the adult population. Not recommended (see article for discussion of reasons why) Predominantly used by researchers.

Note . SR = self report; AR = administrative record; I = individual; H = household.

Alternatively, researchers can ask participants to choose which occupational category, from a list of occupational categories, is the best match for their current or most recent occupation (see Table 1). These occupational categories are then cross-walked to numerical indices of occupational prestige (see Table 1). For example, Diemer (2009) cross-walked nominal occupational titles (e.g., dentist, truck driver) to numerical values on the Nakao and Treas (1994) index of occupational prestige (in this example—96 and 30). To measure occupational prestige among people that are unemployed, people who are underemployed, or are seasonal workers, respondents could be asked to describe their "usual" or modal employment—assuming some stability in occupational prestige over time—or to describe their most recent occupation.

In addition to their utility as SES measures, occupational prestige measures are useful in psychological research, because (along with labor market earnings—see Table 1) they provide another indicator of occupational attainment. Alternatively, these measures can also be used to capture the prestige of the occupations young people expect to attain later in life, or their occupational expectations, in that occupational expectations can be classified into occupational categories and similarly cross-walked to indices of occupational prestige. This approach provides a numerical operationalization of young people's thinking about their future occupational roles, which are a component of the career development process and relatively strong predictors of later occupational outcomes (Blustein, 2006; Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Ali, 2009).

Educational attainment, the second of our SES indicators, is frequently measured by the highest degree participants have attained or the highest grade level they have completed (see Table 1). A unique advantage of this measure is that can be used with adults directly, as well as indirectly with older children or adolescents, to ascertain a family's educational attainment. For example, child/adolescent and school-based research commonly administers surveys to children without also surveying their parents. Older children and adolescents understand and can provide relatively accurate reports of one or both parent's educational attainment, but have less knowledge of parental occupations, family income, or wealth. Because of this, parental educational attainment is often the SES indicator of choice in research conducted with youth interviewed or surveyed at school, or where access to parents is limited (Crosnoe, 2009; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Diemer & Li, 2011). School-level data also generally contain information about a school's average level of parental education. Parents' educational attainment is one of a host of demographic indicators typically reported by school districts and available on most state-level Department of Education, school district, and individual school websites.

Irrespective of who the respondent is, it is important to keep in mind that most educational attainment measures are scaled according to the U.S. educational structure (see Table 1). Thus, when conducting research with participants who completed a majority of their education outside of the United States, modifications

to the response scales are needed so that educational attainment measures are more meaningful to both the participant and the researcher (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2003). For example, one can separately assess level of education in participants' home country and in the United States, to examine if they are differentially associated with the outcome variables of interest. Further, as noted in Table 1, education levels and occupational prestige, in particular, can be restricted in highly homogeneous samples (e.g., families receiving public assistance). In this case, SES measures generally have little utility in quantitative analyses beyond understanding the SES demographics of participants—but are still important to collect.

Total family income is a third indicator of SES detailed in Table 1. Total family income is one of the most commonly used SES indicators in social science research, albeit less so in psychology (Duncan & Petersen, 2001; Duncan & Magnuson, 2003). Income data provide several advantages: they are a dynamic representation of individuals' access to and control over resources; are useful in policy-relevant research because income can be directly manipulated as a policy instrument; and, income-dependent indices, such as median household income, are useful in cross-national economic comparisons (Roosa, Deng, Nair, & Burrell, 2005).

However, measuring income can be deceptively complicated. Nonresponse and response bias have spurred survey researchers to better understand sources of error inherent in reports of various sources of income, including labor market earnings, transfer program income sources (e.g., food stamps, unemployment insurance benefits), and asset income sources (e.g., savings accounts; Bound, Brown, & Mathiowetz, 2001; Moore, Stinson, & Welniak, 2000). Sources of bias have been attributed to survey design considerations (i.e., not understanding or misunderstanding the question being asked), lack of sufficient knowledge to answer the question(s) adequately (e.g., asking children to report on family or household income), retrieval problems, such as an inaccurate recall of income information, and participants' subjective discomfort or aversion to reporting income data (see Bound et al., 2001; Moore et al., 2000; Duncan & Petersen, 2001). Further, although there is some suggestion of more systematic respondent bias among high income individuals (i.e., those in the top quintile of the income distribution, Nelson, 1993), recent reviews do not find a consistent association between income level and income response bias (Bound et al., 2001; Moore et al., 2000). It may be that conflicting findings regarding higher-income response bias is setting-specific. That is, higher-income individuals may be more likely to underreport income when that income is subject to taxation or in response to a survey administered by a governmental agency (i.e., the Survey of Income Program Participation, or SIPP, which is administered by the Census Bureau) than when reporting income on an anonymous survey as part of the research process.

In response to such concerns with income measurement error, scholars have devised various approaches to collecting income-related information (i.e., total

income, labor market earnings, transfer program, and assets income) to help avoid common pitfalls and minimize participant nonresponse (see, for example, Duncan & Petersen, 2001; Moore et al., 2000). Examples of several such strategies are listed in Table 1, including scaffolding participants' responses using follow-up prompts and providing income ranges to help recall accuracy, in order to overcome participants' reluctance to disclose what is considered by many to be personal information. Finally, income data have also be shown to be highly volatile from year to year, especially among lower SES households, leading to recommendations to aggregate income data across multiple years whenever possible (Duncan & Rogers, 1988). The assessment of labor market earnings is also detailed in Table 1; due to the similarities between income and labor market earnings, we do not provide additional consideration to the measurement of labor market earnings here.

Disparate populations also require additional consideration when assessing income or labor market earnings. For example, migrants may send anywhere from 10% to upward of 80% of their monthly income abroad (Terry & Wilson, 2005). Remittances may impact the household income, consumption, and poverty estimates of migrants, particularly as the base household income of many remitters would classify them as poor. Given the amount of remittances originating from the United States, it is important to assess this often "silent" exchange of income.

Familial wealth provides a more multigenerational and comprehensive measurement of economic resources than household income alone, and for that reason is a more accurate measure of access to economic resources than income (Diemer & Ali, 2009). Generally, family wealth is measured by total net worth, or a family's assets (i.e., stocks, bonds, home equity, businesses owned) less that family's debts (i.e., mortgage loans, car loans, credit card debt)—which does make it possible for some families to have no or a negative net worth (Conley, 1999; Yeung & Conley, 2008). Table 1 details how wealth is typically measured, as well as the various subcomponents of wealth (i.e., liquid assets vs. real estate).

Household wealth influences both children's academic achievement (e.g., Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Yeung & Conley, 2008) and youths' postsecondary enrollment and completion, above and beyond the effects of other SES indicators such as income and educational attainment (e.g., Williams-Shanks & Destin, 2009). Wealth holds promise in future educational research, perhaps in more precisely measuring the academic rigor and support for college-going that a school provides (given the relation between wealth and school resources) or in conveying expectations for educational attainment beyond parental status and income. Because wealth disparities are even greater than income disparities (Wolff, 2010), wealth measurement may provide inroads into understanding and remediating some of the driving forces of societal inequalities in the United States. Further, wealth provides a way to understand how some families are better-able to manage economic shocks or crises—in that they have a larger pool of economic resources

to draw on when faced with layoffs, natural disasters, or unexpected medical bills (Diemer & Ali, 2009).

Despite these advantages, one drawback to measuring wealth is that many participants may find questions about wealth to be even more invasive than questions about income—potentially leading to problems with nonresponse to wealth items. Other participants may have little knowledge of disparate economic assets, particularly lower-income people and families (see Table 1 for more germane wealth measures with these populations). Measuring wealth, encompassing its' various components (see Table 1), also requires more time and space in a survey than other somewhat more parsimonious SES measures, such as income. Despite these disadvantages, wealth holds promise in helping psychologists to more comprehensively measure the economic standing of a given person or family and represents a "next frontier" in approaches to measuring SES in psychological research (Diemer & Ali, 2009; Williams-Shanks & Destin, 2009).

In addition to these individual SES indicators, psychologists also use composite SES measures, such as the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status, which is comprised of several SES indicators (i.e., education, occupation, sex, and marital status; Hollingshead, 1975) (see Table 1). However, these composites are based on outdated classification systems and obfuscate which SES components drive observed associations between variables (Duncan & Magnuson, 2003; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). For example, although a composite-SES measure may predict young people's educational attainment, because each component is not examined separately, it is impossible to gauge which SES component accounts for variation in educational attainment. In addition, Callahan and Eyberg (2010) found that a model containing separate indices of income, education, and occupational prestige explained three times more variance in observed parenting behavior than a model containing a SES composite. Because individual SES indicators yield estimates of each component's unique contribution, they are often more informative for scholarship, policy, and intervention. Scholars have therefore argued against the use of composite SES indices and instead recommend using individual indicators of SES (APA Task Force on SES, 2007; Duncan & Magnuson, 2003).

Measuring Poverty: Part I—Absolute Indicators

Beyond the triumvirate of SES indicators—occupational prestige, educational attainment, and income—psychologists often have a particular interest in understanding how income poverty and economic hardship affect the health and well-being of adults, children, and families (see Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998; Smith, 2010). SES measures that focus explicitly on poverty and material hardship are detailed in Table 2. Measures of absolute poverty identify a basic standard of living below which individuals are deemed to be "poor" or disadvantaged by societal standards (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005). One example of an absolute

Table 2. Measurement of Poverty in Psychological Research: Best Practices and Recommendations

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Absolute)				
Emphasis is on identifying basic standard of living parameters. Individuals not able to secure enough resources to meet basic standard of living standards are deemed to be "poor" or disadvantaged by societal standards (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
Federal Poverty Thresholds (FPT) / Federal Poverty Levels (FPL)	Thresholds and guidelines are available online through the Census Bureau and Department of Health and Human Services websites	I H	The FPT and FPL are considered measures of absolute poverty because they are calculated as a fixed dollar amount—individuals or families with pretax income at or below this amount are officially classified as "poor"; those with income above this amount are considered not poor. Calculation of the FPT is based on a formula derived by the Dept of Agriculture during the 1960s, indicating that food-related costs consume about a third of a household's monthly budget, this number is multiplied by 3 to calculate poverty thresholds, adjusted for family size and inflation, but not cost-of-living differences (Roosa et al., 2005; Short, 2011). For example, 2012 FPT for a family of four is $23,050. A table of poverty thresholds by family size and number of adults and children in the home can be found at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html. FPLs are another version of the federal poverty measure, used primarily for administrative purposes. The FPL or a multiplier of the FPL (e.g., 125% or 185% of the FPL) are used to determine eligibility for federal programs, including the Children's Health Insurance Program and Job Corps. The guidelines are issued annually in the Federal Register by the Department of Health and Human Services (see http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/12fedreg.shtml).	Predominantly used for policy purposes. FPT used by Census Bureau for statistical purposes—i.e., to determine the number of poor individuals in the U.S. Federal poverty guidelines or FPL's used by federal and state agencies to determine eligibility for public assistance benefits, such as child care and health care subsidies, nutritional supplement programs, etc. (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012; http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/12poverty.shtml#guidelines).

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Absolute)				
Emphasis is on identifying basic standard of living parameters. Individuals not able to secure enough resources to meet basic standard of living standards are deemed to be "poor" or disadvantaged by societal standards (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)	N/A	N/A	The SPM is designed to address some of the limitations in the FPT, principally the lack of adjustment for geographic variations in cost-of-living differences across the U.S. The SPM is based on a more complex formula that takes into account additional economic resources (e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit refunds) and adjusts for expenditures related to basic necessities (i.e., food, shelter, clothing, and utilities) and work related expenses (e.g., child care) (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012; Short, 2011).	At the moment, used exclusively for policy purposes; primarily by the Census Bureau as an alternative approach to tracking the number of poor individuals and families in the U.S. However, SPM thresholds are *not* intended to assess eligibility for government programs at this time (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012).
Basic Family Budget	Calculators are available through multiple sources (see description for examples)	I H	Estimate of the minimum total cost of necessary family expenses (e.g., housing, health care, child care, food, transportation) across urban and rural areas. Measure captures minimum income required to maintain a "safe and decent standard of living." (Roosa et al., 2005; see also the Lower Income Living Standard Level guidelines: http://www.doleta.gov/llsil/2012/) Examples: The Economic Policy Institute's Basic Family Budget Calculator provides estimates of basic costs by state, city, metropolitan or rural area, by family size. See http://www.epi.org/resources/budget/. For example, in 2007 the basic family budget for a family of four (two parents, two adults) in the Greater Los Angeles Metropolitan area was $54,078, more than twice the FPT ($21,027) in 2007. The California Budget Project (2010) provides estimates of modest standard of living budgets, based on typical costs for housing, utilities, child care, transportation, food, health coverage, payroll and income taxes, and miscellaneous expenses. Budgets are estimated separately by county.	Can be obtained for broad spectrum of individuals/families. Predominantly used for policy purposes, and more recently by researchers (see Chien & Mistry, 2012).

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Absolute)				
Emphasis is on identifying basic standard of living parameters. Individuals not able to secure enough resources to meet basic standard of living standards are deemed to be "poor" or disadvantaged by societal standards (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
School level indicators of poverty	AR—information is readily available on most school's websites. It can also be requested from either school district offices or state departments of education.	S	School's designation as a Title I school. Refers to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001–a designation for schools serving a high percentage of children from poor families (40%). Percentage of a student body eligible for Free/Reduced School Lunch Program. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program, established under the National School Lunch Act, that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children from lower-income families. Administrative records indicate the percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced meals at a given school.	Policies established by the Department of Education and US Department of Agriculture to determine schools' eligibility for additional economic resources or students' eligibility to receive free or reduced costs meals at school. As broad-brush indicators of SES (specifically poverty status), predominantly used by researchers to select schools on the basis of SES or in comparative studies of schooling and student outcomes.
Neighborhood level indicators of poverty	AR	N	Neighborhood selection typically determined based on U.S. Census Bureau data. The following units demarcate populations with fairly homogeneous sociodemographic characteristics: - Census tract—average population of 4,000 residents - Census block-group—average of 1,000 residents. - Census block—average of 85 residents - Zip code—units capture larger geographic areas (~30,000 residents); includes a more heterogeneous sampling. Index of risk computed using one or more: percentage of households living at or below FPT; percentage of unmarried adult residents; percentage of unemployed young adults; amount of violent and nonviolent crime; percent of single-headed households.	Can be used as a stand-alone measure of environmental risk, often as an index of children's exposure to deviant socialization by peers and community members. Can also be combined with family-level indicators of poverty to predict child outcomes. Useful for research and policy purposes.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Absolute)				
Emphasis is on identifying basic standard of living parameters. Individuals not able to secure enough resources to meet basic standard of living standards are deemed to be "poor" or disadvantaged by societal standards (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
			Resident self-reports of degree of social cohesion or disorganization within a community, capturing perceptions of: - Collective efficacy (looking out for each other) - Size of supportive network - Safety of environment - Examples: *Poverty area*: > = 20% of persons in area below poverty *Extreme poverty area*: > = 40% of persons below poverty *Undereducated neighborhoods*: > = 25% of adults with less than a high school degree	
Poverty Measures (Relative):				
Emphasis on subjective perceptions of what poverty means, experiences and adaptations to living in poverty. Focus on relative deprivation, standards of living, and material deprivation (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
Material Hardship and Deprivation	SR	I H	Focus on assessing an individual or family's unmet material needs in the areas of food, housing, and medical care. Additional measures include crowding as an indicator of material hardship (see Iceland, 2003). Examples: (1) (UNMET NEEDS): In the past 12 months, has there been a time when you and your immediate family . . . (SUM) (a) Needed food but couldn't afford to buy it or couldn't afford to go out to get it? (YES/NO) (b) Were without telephone service for any reason? (c) Didn't pay the full amount of the rent or mortgage? (d) Were evicted from your home for not paying the rent or mortgage? (e) Had service turned off by the gas or electric company, or the oil company wouldn't deliver oil because payments were not made? (f) Had someone who needed to see a doctor or go to the hospital but didn't go? (g) Had someone who needed a dentist but couldn't go?	Can be used with broad spectrum of the adult population, but most sensitive and applicable for use with individuals and families experiencing economic and material hardship. Indices of hardship and deprivation can be used to create indices of cumulative risk (see text). Questions are typically asked of adult members in the households, but have also been adapted for research studies with youth (see Duncan et al., 2007). Predominantly used by researchers.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Relative): Emphasis on subjective perceptions of what poverty means, experiences and adaptations to living in poverty. Focus on relative deprivation, standards of living, and material deprivation (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
			(2) (CROWDING): How many rooms in home, not counting bathrooms? CROWDING = 1 if # of rooms < # of household members; otherwise CROWDING = 0. (1) (HOUSING PROBLEMS): Are any of the following conditions present in your home? How about . . . (SUM) (a) A leaking roof or ceiling? (YES/NO) (b) A toilet, hot water heater, or other plumbing that doesn't work? (c) Broken windows? (d) Exposed electrical wires? (e) Rats, mice, roaches or other insects? (f) A furnace, boiler, or heating system that you can't count on? (g) A stove or refrigerator that doesn't work properly? Adapted from Duncan et al. (2007). See also: Mayer & Jencks (1989)	
Food (In)Security	SR	H	According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security refers to, "dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living" (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2009). Assessed using a 10-item questionnaire (18 items, if there are children in the household) about food insufficiency, food quality, reduction in food intake (adults and children, separately), and obtaining food in socially unacceptable ways (e.g., stealing) (Nord et al., 2009; see also http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food/nutrition/assistance/food/security-in-the-us/survey-tools.aspx). Each item also asks if the insecurity stems from financial constraints. Households are classified as food secure or insecure (i.e., have experienced difficulty at some time during the year providing	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of the adult population. Potential for use with adolescent and child populations, with appropriate modifications. Useful for research and policy purposes.
.	.			

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Poverty Measures (Relative): Emphasis on subjective perceptions of what poverty means, experiences and adaptations to living in poverty. Focus on relative deprivation, standards of living, and material deprivation (Iceland, 2003; Roosa et al., 2005).				
			enough food for all family members due to a lack of resources). A subset of food insecure households are classified as experiencing "very low food security" (i.e., food intake of some household members reduced and eating patterns disrupted due to limited resources)	
Economic Pressure	SR	I H	Focuses on the psychological distress resulting from financial difficulties due either to living in poverty or declining income (Conger & Elder, 1994). Three domains: (a) Inability to pay bills (b) Unmet material needs—similar to material hardship described above but also includes additional items, such as enough money for recreational activities (sports, music lessons), or other events such as school trips. (c) Financial cutbacks in response to economic hardship (17 items, including discretionary items such as eating out and vacations as well as necessities such as medical care). Mistry et al. (2008) distinguish between economic pressure due to meeting basic needs (e.g., rent, utilities, food) and modest "extras" (e.g., going to movies, child birthday parties).	Can be used with broad spectrum of the adult population, but most sensitive and applicable for use with individuals and families experiencing economic and material hardship. Questions are typically asked of adult members in the households, but have also been adapted for research studies with youth. Predominantly used by researchers.
Income-to-Needs Ratio (INR)	See income	I H	Derived by dividing total household income (see above) by FPT for given year and family size. Yields a continuous score. An INR of 1 denotes income at FPT. Values less than 1 denote incomes below subsistence level; values > 1 denote incomes above FPT. INRs can also be converted to an ordinal variable, for example: (a) Extreme poverty: INR $\leq .5$ (below 50% FPL), (b) Poor: INR less than or equal to 1, (c) Low-Income: INR between 1 and 2, (d) Adequate-income: INR between 2 and 4 and (e) Affluent: INR > 4). See: Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian (2008); Roosa et al. (2005).	Recommended for use with broad spectrum of the adult population. Most frequently used by researchers to index family income to the FPT as a means of gauging a family's total household income relative to a "basic standard of living" benchmark.

Note: SR = self report; AR = administrative record; I = individual; H = household; N = neighborhood; S = school.

standard is the Federal Poverty Threshold (FPT), used primarily for *statistical* purposes such as for tracking the number of poor individuals, families, and children in the United States; these estimates are published annually (every September) by the Census Bureau. The federal poverty guidelines (i.e., the Federal Poverty Level; FPL), in comparison, are simplified versions of the poverty thresholds that are used primarily for *administrative* purposes such as determining eligibility for public assistance programs (e.g., the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program; more commonly referred to as food stamps). Updated guidelines are issued annually in the Federal Register by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS; http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/faq.shtml#differences). Multipliers of the FPL are often used to determine eligibility for other programs—Head Start eligibility is often contingent on a family income up to 150% to 175% of the FPL, for example.

Because of the significance of absolute measures of poverty to policy making, research, and practice, we include a detailed discussion of the absolute poverty measures (see also Table 2). In addition to being better informed consumers of poverty statistics and guidelines, understanding how poverty measures are derived has important implications for researchers—for understanding what the measure captures (or does not adequately capture) and for defining their population of interest.

Conceived during the 1960s as part of the set of "War on Poverty" programs, the FPT reflects the cost of maintaining a "minimally adequate diet" and consists of a set of thresholds, adjusted annually for inflation, for families of varying sizes and compositions (i.e., based on number and age of adults and children under the age of 18) compared to a family's pretax cash income (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012; Short, 2011). In 2012, the FPT for a family of four was $23,050 (see https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html for a summary of thresholds), although it is widely acknowledged families with incomes between 100% and 200% of the FPT struggle to make ends meet (Huston & Bentley, 2010). Critics of the FPT point to several limitations, and there has been a longstanding push to revise it (see Citro & Michael, 1995; Roosa et al., 2005). Key among these are that the FPT does not adjust for additional sources of monetary [e.g., food stamps or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance] or in-kind benefits (e.g., housing subsidies) that alter the amount of disposable income a family has, or the resources that families can harness to meet basic family needs. In this way, the FPT has some imprecision in classifying individuals as poor or not poor.

The FPT also does not account for variation in job-related expenses, such as child care and transportation costs (Short, 2011), or for geographic differences in cost-of-living, despite evidence of wide variation in the costs of meeting basic family needs (California Budget Project, 2010; Economic Policy Institute, 2005). Substantively, these limitations of the FPT matter—in that children from lower

income families living in high cost-of-living regions do not do as well academically as their counterparts living in low cost-of-living regions (Chien & Mistry, 2012).

To address some of these limitations, the Census Bureau now publishes estimates of the numbers of people and families in poverty, using a new measure—the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)—along with "official" poverty statistics that are based on the FPT. The SPM thresholds represent "a dollar amount spent on a basic set of goods that includes *f*ood, *c*lothing, *s*helter, and *u*tilities (FCSU), and a small additional amount to allow for other needs (e.g., household supplies, personal care, non-work related transportation)" (Short, 2011, p. 2). The SPM threshold equals the 33rd percentile of the expenditures distribution for a consumer unit (an estimate of averaged consumer spending in the U.S. population) with two children, multiplied by 1.2. The thresholds vary by family size (in the same way as the FPT) and by geographic differences in housing costs. SPM guidelines specify that the thresholds be revised every 5 years (Short, 2011). Poverty status is determined by comparing the SPM threshold to a family's "sum cash income, plus in-kind benefits that families can use to meet their FCSU needs, minus taxes (or plus tax credits), minus work expenses, [and] out-of-pocket medical expenses" (Short, 2011, p. 3). To illustrate differences between the SPM and FPT, in 2010 the poverty threshold for a family of four (two adults, two children) was $24,343 and $22,113, respectively (Short, 2011)—an income difference of about 10%, which is quite meaningful across the socioeconomic distribution. Finally, it is important to note that debate persists about whether the SPM is an indicator of absolute versus relative poverty (see http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2010/05/11-census-haskins). Related to this, Table 2 includes a description of basic family budgets, which are similar to the SPM in that they are concerned with the minimal resources required for basic needs—but are not detailed in this article because these are relatively straightforward measures.

The FPT and SPM both track poverty status among individuals (and families). In some instances, researchers may be more interested in assessing poverty status at the school or neighborhood level. As shown in Table 2, two commonly used aggregate measures of school-level poverty are the percent of the student body eligible for free or reduced cost meals and a school's designation as a Title I school. The National School Lunch Act (1946; reauthorized as Healthy, Hunger Kids Free Act of 2010) subsidizes school meals and snacks for poor and low-income children, based on FPL. Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the FPL are eligible for free meals whereas those from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the FPL are eligible for reduced-price meals (see http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/). Because eligibility for free and reduced school meals is anchored to the FPL, it is a useful gauge of school's aggregated poverty status.

A school's designation as a "Title 1 school"—referring to Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001—identifies it as a school serving a high percentage (40% or more) of children from low-income families and thus eligible to receive additional funding to ensure that all children are able to meet state academic content and achievement standards (see http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html). Information about a school's Title I status and percent of students eligible for free/reduced school meals is typically posted on its website and can be requested from a school district or the state department of education. This information can help researchers to both better describe their study population as well as identify eligible schools (e.g., those where a majority of students are from low-income families) from which to recruit study participants.

In addition to school-level indicators of poverty status, researchers may also be interested in assessing poverty at a neighborhood level. For example, neighborhood disadvantage is a robust predictor of child academic failure, conduct problems, teen pregnancy, and symptoms of anxiety and depression, even in examinations spanning longer than a decade and when controlling for various measured risks and unmeasured confounds (e.g., Goodnight et al., 2012). However, measuring neighborhood poverty is somewhat more complicated than measurement at the family or school level. This complexity, in part, is because the researcher needs to set the geographical boundaries that define a neighborhood, which in psychological research is generally accomplished using Census-defined catchment areas (blocks or tracts) or zip codes (e.g., Krieger et al., 1997), as outlined in Table 2. Once the community of interest is demarcated, then socioeconomic "health" can be indexed by both objective and subjective indicators that are measured, at various levels of complexity.

A fairly straightforward approach to measuring neighborhood poverty, which is commonly employed in child development research, is to use the percentage of households in a given catchment area that are living below the poverty line. As detailed in Table 2, neighborhoods with 30–40% of households with incomes at or below the FPT are generally considered "impoverished" (i.e., Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2011). More complex indicators of neighborhood quality (see Table 2) have also been calculated by capturing multiple risks within a catchment area, such as the percentage of people in a neighborhood with less than a high school education, the percentage of female-headed households, violent crime rates, and percentage of unemployed adults (e.g., Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011). Subjective assessments of the quality of a neighborhood from the perspective of current residents can also be used as indicators of neighborhood poverty, ranging from single items asking how "safe" a neighborhood is to multiple-item scales assessing social disorganization or collective efficacy (e.g., Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008). Although measures capturing multiple indicators of a neighborhood's quality tend to outperform single item indicators, measures capturing duration of residence in addition to quality of residence tend to capture the clearest picture of neighborhood poverty (e.g., Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011).

Measuring Poverty: Part II—Relative Indicators

Relative poverty measures, in contrast to the classification focus of absolute poverty measures, such as the FPT and SPM, focus on perceptions of the adequacy of one's standard of living (Conger et al., 2010; Mistry & Lowe, 2006) as well as experiences of material deprivation and hardship (Gershoff et al., 2007, Iceland, 2003; Mayer & Jencks, 1989), to "tap into" the more affective and psychological experience of poverty and economic hardship. These measures focus on the subjective experiences of living in poverty and dealing with the associated stresses of economic hardship, and are typically assessed along a continuum. They are most commonly used by family process researchers, who are interested in how SES and economic hardship "trickle down" to influence family dynamics, and accordingly, affect the health, psychological well-being, and educational outcomes of individuals and families. Measures of relative deprivation and economic stress help explain the *mediating processes* by which SES affects individual physical and psychological well-being, as well as economic and social mobility.

Indices of material deprivation (see Table 2; also Mayer & Jencks, 1989) can be summed to create an index of cumulative risk, which has been directly linked to physiologic outcomes (Evans & English, 2002) as well as academic and social and behavioral outcomes in children (Gershoff et al., 2007). Material deprivation measures are also useful for highlighting mechanisms amenable to policy and intervention efforts. For example, studies demonstrating links between children's experience of food insecurity (see Table 2 for measurement of food insecurity) and developmental outcomes can bolster support for policies such as the Women, Infant, and Children Nutritional Supplement Program (WIC) and the National Food Lunch Program (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2003; Slack & Yoo, 2005).

There is now robust evidence that one of the pathways through which economic hardship affects individual functioning and child development is through inducements of feelings of economic strain and poverty-related stress (see Table 2 for examples of economic hardship measures). Specifically, this work theoretically posits and empirically demonstrates that the strain associated with the daily hassles of making ends meet takes a toll on mental health, increases conflict and discord, and among families, interferes with high quality parenting as well as children's social and emotional outcomes (Conger et al., 2010). A recent extension of this research further distinguishes between the sources of low-income parents' felt economic pressure and the link to psychological well-being. Specifically, whereas low-income mothers reported feeling just "okay" in response to their inability to meet basic needs (e.g., rent)—accepting that the cycle of falling behind and catching up was one that they often found themselves caught up in—they reported greater levels of depressive symptoms and lower levels of efficacy when unable to afford discretionary modest "extras," especially child-related extras such as birthday and Christmas gifts (Mistry, Lowe, Benner, & Chien, 2008). Such effects

are especially evident in societies with pronounced income inequality, indexed by very large gaps in income between the poorest and wealthiest households (e.g., Sapolsky, 2004). In short, relative deprivation measures have been tremendously useful in guiding researchers' theoretical reasoning and understanding of the pernicious effects of poverty on many domains of development.

The final measure of relative poverty included in Table 2 is the income-to-needs ratio (INR), which compares a family's income to the minimal economic resources required for a family of that size. The INR is computed by dividing total family income by the FPT for a given year and family size. INRs are therefore more precise SES measures than household income alone, in that INRs adjust for the number of family members requiring economic resources in a household and the FPT for that year. The INR is continuous, but can be transformed into a categorical variable for moderation analyses. As depicted in Table 2, INR cutoffs have been proposed to nominally classify the SES continuum, including families who experience extreme poverty (i.e., an INR of .50 or lower; approximately $11,500 for family of four in 2012 using the FPT; Census Bureau, 2012), low-income to near-poor (i.e., an INR between 1 and 2; roughly between $23,100 and $46,000 for a family of four in 2012), and affluent (i.e., an INR greater than 4; income greater than $92,200 for a family of four in 2012) (Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Roosa et al., 2005). Despite these advantages, the INR is based upon the FPT and accordingly suffers from some of its limitations. Namely, the INR is typically computed without regard to geographic variations in cost-of-living differences. Replacing the FPT with a geographically sensitive basic family budget estimate in the denominator of the INR calculation may yield a more sensitive and precise measure in future studies.

Measuring Subjective Social Status (SSS)

Although important in their own right, SES indicators omit important aspects of social class standing—that is, a person's perceptions of their relative social standing in relation to others in society. Such dimensions are captured by SSS (Adler et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2004). SSS measures capture an individual's subjective perception of his or her "place" in society, based on a variety of tangible and intangible factors. The scales generally include a person's judgment—based on his or her personal/human capital (occupational prestige, income), social capital (access to socially desirable information), and cultural capital (what he or she knows)—of where they stand relative to others in society. A visual SSS assessment technique asks respondents to indicate where they rank on a ladder of status from "1" (low) to "10" (high) in comparison to the rest of society (Adler et al., 2000; see Table 3). The ladder measure has been used widely with adults (Adler et al., 2000) and more recently with adolescents (Goodman et al., 2001), and elementary school children (Mistry, White, Chow, Gillien-O'Neel, & Brown, 2012). It has

Table 3. Measurement of Subjective Social Status (SSS) in Psychological Research: Best Practices and Recommendations

Indicator	Source	Level	Description	Intended Population and Use
Subjective Social Status: A subjective social marker indicative of a person's position within a given society. Includes categorical labels such as "working class" that denote a person's access and accumulation of resources, educational credentials, skills, assets, and cultural/political capital. Also includes continuous indicators of perceived social status (Krieger et al., 1997).				
Social Class Worldview Model	SR	I H	Subjective perception of one's standing within a social-economic-power hierarchy, using referent categories such as "poor," "working class," "middle class," or "affluent." This perspective explicitly acknowledges the subjectivity of social class and the social class cultures people are embedded in (Liu et al., 2004).	Can be used with broad spectrum of the adult population. Predominantly used by practitioners, in order to understand how people subjectively identify with social class worldviews and groups.
McArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status	SR	I H C	Subjective perceptions of one's social position to others in society, in terms of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige. Individual status is measured by asking participant to rank oneself on a "social ladder" of prestige, relative to others in the United States. The "community ladder" asks people to indicate their perceived standing in relation to others in their community (Adler, et al., 2000; McArthur SES & Health Network) A modified version of the ladder has been developed for elementary school students (grades 4–6). Statement reads, "Now, I'd like to ask you some questions about your family. Imagine that this ladder pictures how American society is set up. At the top are the people that have the most money and at the bottom are the people who have the least money. Now, think about your family. Where do you think they would be on this ladder? Mark an X on the step where your family would be on this ladder." (Mistry et al., 2012).	Can be used with broad spectrum of the adult and youth population. Predominantly used by researchers. Extensively used in health psychology research, in order to ascertain the impacts of perceived socioeconomic standing on a variety of health outcomes.

Note: SR = self report; I = individual; H = household; C = community.

been shown to be a strong predictor of adult physical health (Adler et al., 2000; Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003; Singh-Manoux, Marmot, & Adler, 2005) and sense of personal control (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009), and more recently of children's intergroup attitudes toward the poor, middle class, and rich (Mistry et al., 2012).

SSS is also referenced using categorical terms such as poor, working class, middle class, and owning class that capture presumed variability in terms of values, beliefs, preferences, manners, language spoken, social exclusion and attitudes across social class groups (Smith, 2010). The Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM, see Table 3) provides a theoretical frame to these referent terms, explaining how people understand and internalize social class "economic cultures" (Liu et al., 2004). The SCWM posits that people have internalized class-related worldviews and economic cultures that prescribe certain behaviors according to their class status, such as dress, language, and etiquette—and that people strive to maintain homeostasis within their perceived class position. An SCWM-informed measurement strategy would be to ask people which social class group (e.g., working class, middle class) they identify with as well as perceived pressures to conform to an economic culture. This more psychological approach helps us understand how social class affects and is subjectively interpreted by people.

Scholars have noted that some in the United States may subjectively identify with the normative referent social class group—middle class—despite economic evidence that they "should" identify with a different group (Diemer & Ali, 2009). For example, a plumber's occupational income may place them firmly in the middle of the SES distribution; however, this same plumber may subjectively identify as working class, based on his or her lifestyle, perceived social position, and access to social and cultural capital. Key is that SSS assessments are not necessarily about determining the accuracy of one's actual economic position but instead reflect one's perceived social standing in a community or group in a given sociohistorical context.

General Considerations for Measuring SES and SSS

There are many complexities involved in measuring social class that underscore the need to carefully relate choice of measurement of SES and SSS to a study's purpose, the phenomenon being investigated, and participants' ability to respond accurately to the questions being asked (Williams, 2009). For example, in research examining how the experiences of first generation college students differ from those of students with college-educated parents, objective indicators of SES, such as financial aid receipt, may be important markers of students' access to economic resources. Researchers have to further decide where and from whom to gather information about financial aid—from the student, their parents, official

records, or some combination of these—considerations that will inform the quality and comprehensiveness of the available information.

However, these same indicators may be less relevant to understanding students' interpersonal experiences and sense of belonging on a college campus. In this case, researchers may choose to assess the student's SSS and compare that to the modal social class standing of the university's student body, as assessed by indicators of family SES such as parents' educational attainment or family income. Parental educational attainment may be a better indicator of SES than parental income in studies of youth educational attainment because parents with postsecondary degrees are better able to provide the cultural and social capital regarding college-going that facilitates educational attainment (Diemer & Li, 2012). On the other hand, household income is clearly important in terms of providing the financial support necessary to complete one's postsecondary education. The overarching point is that there is no single "best" measure of SES or SSS that will meet all needs, and investigators need to carefully consider which dimension(s) of social class they are interested in and best practices for its measurement in a particular study (Williams, 2009).

Additional consideration is also warranted when assessing social class among low-income populations. Canino et al. (2004) observed that whereas indicators of relative poverty predicted psychopathology among their sample of lower-income Puerto Rican children, measures of absolute poverty did not. This is consistent with a larger body of work demonstrating greater variability in perception of economic (in)adequacy and its links to various psychological outcomes among lower-income families and individuals (see Conger et al., 2010).

Finally, the effects of social class do not operate in a vacuum, but rather intersect with other social categories, such as race, ethnicity and gender. For example, African Americans and Latinos are less likely to be employed, hold less prestigious jobs, and earn less occupational income than Whites and Asians (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Similarly, women earn substantially less than men across all racial, ethnic, and age groups (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Such demographic disparities suggest that the intersections among social class and other demographic categories ought to be considered. One way to do so is to take an intersectionality approach, which simultaneously considers multiple social categories and takes into account how interlocking identities relate to outcomes of interest (McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality is a reconceptualization of demographic categories in which we understand how they intertwine, permeate and transform each other (Crenshaw, 1989) as well as how these unique intersections relate to outcomes of interest (Cole, 2009). Intersectionality arose out of a desire to better understand who is left out of psychological research when single demographic categories such as race or social class are used. Collins (2000) suggests that we might capture the complexities of multiple social identities by locating a person on a matrix containing multiple social categories.

Intersectionality compels us to both consider and include social class in our research (as we have argued extensively in this article), and also to think of new ways to better capture lived experiences of individuals based simultaneously on their social class standing and on other social dimensions. New measurement strategies will likely arise from such considerations and will have to grapple with the issues and complexities outlined in this article.

Summary and Conclusion

We contend that social class needs to be more fully integrated into psychological scholarship, while acknowledging that psychologists generally receive little training in how to conceptualize and measure this construct (APA Task Force on SES, 2007). As a result, psychology's modal consideration and understanding of the profound and pervasive impacts of social class has lagged behind related disciplines. As Evans (2004) concluded, "Psychologists need to come to grips with the ecological reality of poverty and desist relegating income and SES to unexplained confounding variables in their models of human behavior and well-being" (p. 88). To remedy these problems, this article has summarized compelling evidence regarding the central role of social class in domains of primary interest to many psychologists. Concrete guidance regarding the conceptualization and measurement of social class across disparate settings is also provided to spur psychologists' capacity to do the same. Our hope is that this article will collectively advance consideration of and the capacity to address social class in psychological research, engendering a broader and deeper integration of social class in psychology.

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