

Development and Validation of the Privileged Social Class Attitudes Scale (PSCAS) Ψ

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Abstract

The goal of the study was to develop a scale to assess the social class attitudinal profiles of people with social class privilege. Based on social class theory and other models of privileged identities, we generated an item pool reflecting different attitudinal profiles. In Study 1, exploratory factor analysis revealed a scale with four core social class attitude subscales (Social Class Prejudice, Acknowledgement, Awareness, and Action) and three additional scales reflecting independent social class constructs (Social Class Identity Centrality, Guilt, and Fortune). In Study 2, we found that the subscales fit together in a multifactor correlational model and established construct validity. However, the Action subscale surprisingly correlated positively with the Prejudice scale. Post hoc analyses revealed this correlation existed only for those high in just world beliefs. Taken together, the Privileged Social Class Attitudes Scale provides a new tool for investigating the attitudinal profiles of people with social class privilege.

Keywords

social status, classism, just world beliefs, scale development, social class privilege

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Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

The manuscript describes the development and validation of the Privileged Social Class Attitudes Scale (PSCAS), a new tool to measure the social class attitudes of individuals with social class privilege. The tool has implications for research, practice, advocacy, and training, enabling greater attention to be given to the experiences and implications of social class for individuals with social class privilege.

Introduction

For nearly 70 years since [Young \(1958\)](#) first introduced the term, the United States has proudly characterized itself as a meritocracy—a country led by the premise first established in the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 that anyone in the United States can achieve success through merit and effort, rather than because of their lineage ([Alvarado, 2010](#)). Rather than eradicating racist and classist systems of capital, however, meritocratic ideology has instead reinforced them by denying structural and systemic racism and classism in the United States. This denial has consequences, as inequities are perpetuated when people with privileged identities fail to acknowledge their privilege and the systemic oppression it perpetuates ([Liu et al., 2007](#)).

Within the applied helping professions and counseling psychology in particular, researchers have conducted considerable and groundbreaking work to understand both the implications of cultural privilege and the identity development processes of individuals with certain privileged identities. Because of the preeminent role of race in dictating access to social and economic capital in the United States, much of this work has focused on the identity development processes of racially privileged (i.e., White) individuals (e.g., [Helms, 1990, 1995](#)) and the implications of Whiteness on racial attitudes (e.g., [Goren & Plaut, 2012](#)) and engagement in antiracist efforts (e.g., [Edwards, 2006](#); [Malott et al., 2015](#); [Sue, 2017](#)). In more recent years, landmark research has also examined how individuals across the socioeconomic spectrum grow their social class and classism consciousness ([Liu, 2012b](#)), providing clinicians with frameworks to guide clients in evaluating and integrating social class and classism experiences.

However, absent from the literature to this point are explorations of how people with privileged social class identities develop an awareness of their social class and form attitudes about social class more broadly. Because of this gap, research that explores the implications of privileged social class identity is limited, as is research that develops and tests interventions that could

support identity and class consciousness development for people with social class privilege. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to design and validate a measure of social class attitudes for individuals with social class privilege. In doing so, we aimed to provide a tool that researchers, practitioners, and advocates can use to understand the experiences of people with privileged social class identities and to help facilitate awareness of their social class to stop perpetuating classist policies and practices inherent in the United States' meritocratic system.

Theories of Social Class Identity

Historically, psychologists have conceptualized social class as a stand-alone, objective, and categorical variable determined by education, occupation, and income (i.e., socioeconomic status). These historical definitions largely divorced social class from other cultural variables, most notably race (Liu, 2017). More recently, however, scholars have increasingly recognized social class as an aspect of sociocultural identity that is continuous, relative, and intersectional (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Liu et al., 2004). In this view, social class exists alongside and interacts with a host of cultural variables (e.g., race, religion, ability status) that determine access to economic resources, social power, and status (Brannon et al., 2017; Liu, 2012b).

Accordingly, contemporary social class theories have described how social class functions in individuals' lives. For instance, Liu (2012b) social class worldview model-revised (SCWM-R) proposes that people live within larger and local economic cultures that determine the types of capital (e.g., human, social, cultural, and material) that people value, legitimize, and use for the sake of gaining access to power, resources, and privilege. Moreover, individuals develop a social class worldview—a lens through which they see themselves, others, and society—through socialization processes rooted in their economic cultures (Liu, 2012b). Although people may not be aware of this worldview, they nonetheless work to maintain it and reinforce their social class status by accruing forms of capital valued in their economic cultures and performing their social class interpersonally and through lifestyle choices (Liu et al., 2004).

As an extension of the SCWM-R, Liu developed the social class and classism consciousness (SCCC) model to describe how people become aware of their social class, with social class and classism consciousness referring to “a person's sense of being in a social class system and to how the person sees the world and others” (Liu, 2012a, p. 9). According to the SCCC, individuals fall within one of three levels of social class consciousness: no social class consciousness, social class self-consciousness, and social class consciousness. Individuals in the first level are generally unaware of social class as a salient factor in their lives; those in the second are beginning to understand

themselves as a socially classed person but do not yet understand the complex roles power and privilege play in structuring economic systems; and those in the final level make intentional choices about the performance and maintenance of social class as a result of their awareness of how social class functions at individual and systemic levels. [Liu \(2012b\)](#) stated that the levels and statuses that comprise the SCCC are arranged hierarchically from less to more cognitively mature and complex. Although people can go through all the statuses, people eventually develop a preferred status.

Finally, [Fouad and Brown's \(2000\)](#) differential status identity (DSI) theory explains how salient cultural variables—especially race and social class—situate individuals in societies, leading to different social and psychological consequences. According to the DSI, all societies are stratified hierarchically based on factors such as social class, gender, race, religion, and disability status. Positioning within this hierarchy dictates differential access to economic resources and social power, so being a member of a group that has low social standing is more salient and leads to marginalized identities being internalized at a deeper level and holding greater psychological consequences. Following from this perspective, individuals who occupy a lower social class group would be more affected by their group belonging than individuals who occupy a higher social class group because it has greater implications for their access to economic resources, social prestige, and social power ([Thompson & Subich, 2007](#)).

Application of Theories to Social Class Privilege

The SCWM-R, SCCC, and DSI have been instrumental in understanding the ways in which individuals understand, manifest, and experience their social class. However, few studies have applied these theories to understand the particular experiences of people who hold social class privilege. According to [Liu \(2017\)](#), privilege not only resides within individuals but also represents “the ways in which history, systems of power, and structures of legitimization leverage themselves into people’s worldviews, values, and beliefs in everyday life” (p. 351). In the United States, those historical and contemporary systems of power are largely shaped by White supremacy. Accordingly, individuals can be considered to have social class privilege when their social class enables them to hold worldviews and have access to human, social, cultural, and material capital that are valued in White supremacist systems.

Although research has largely overlooked the particular experiences of people with social class privilege, the research that does exist about the attitudes and experiences of such individuals aligns with research on other forms of privilege, finding that although social class is salient for individuals with social class privilege (e.g., [Sommerfeld, 2014](#)), the implications of social class may be less visible to those with social class privilege than to those

without (e.g., [Liu et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, in accordance with research about other privileged identities, studies have found those with privileged social class identities tend to assume their worldview is universal and normative and that people not subscribing to their worldview are deviant (e.g., [Liu et al., 2007](#); [Liu & Pope-Davis, 2003](#)). This creates a critical problem—if individuals with social class privilege are unaware of their contributions to systemic oppression, they will perpetuate inequities through social prestige and power ([Liu, 2011, 2012b, 2017](#)). As noted previously, however, few studies have explored how people with privileged social class identities develop awareness and attitudes about social class.

This gap is in contrast to other privileged cultural identities, which have development models that align in several ways. For example, the White racial identity development model ([Helms, 1984](#)) and the multidimensional heterosexual identity development model ([Worthington et al., 2002](#)) both begin with identity blindness and progress through stages of exploring, recognition, acceptance, and synthesis. Specifically, Helms' six-stage model proposes that White identity development occurs over two phases. Phase 1 (abandonment of racism) begins with the contact stage in which people are oblivious to their own racial identity and ends with the reintegration stage in which White people consciously recognize their racial identity but through the lens of White supremacy. In Phase 2 (defining a positive White identity) people move from the pseudo-independence stage in which they question their belief in White superiority to the autonomy stage, which is marked by a nonracist internalized White identity. Similarly, [Worthington et al.'s \(2002\)](#) model suggests individuals with heterosexual identities begin with an unexplored commitment to their heterosexual identity and then, through active exploration and diffusion (or the retreat from exploration), individuals progress to a place of heterosexual identity commitment and, finally, synthesis in which people create a coherent and internalized sense of their heterosexual identity. In sum, these models provide a foundation for a privileged social class identity and attitudes model and highlight the need for such a model.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to develop a model of social class privilege identity and attitudes by creating a scale to assess the social class attitudinal profiles of people with social class privilege. Attitudes refer to relatively enduring evaluations of something based on thoughts, feelings, or behaviors ([Stangor et al., 2022](#)). As such, the scale was created to assess the relatively enduring thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that people with social class privilege have about their social class. Using social class theory (e.g., [Liu, 2012b](#)) and other privileged identity development models (e.g., [Helms, 1984](#)) as a guide, our team created a model of privileged social class attitudes starting

from a place of (a) social class blindness (unquestioned, blind belief in the meritocracy and otherwise lack of awareness about class systems and privilege; oblivious to their own social class identity) to subsequent attitudinal stages of (b) social class prejudice (idealizes higher social classes while denigrating people from lower social classes; explicit classist attitudes), (c) social class acknowledgement (beginning to acknowledge that social class is relevant but downplays its effects; believes that social class differences might exist but does not feel as though the social class system has affected them personally), (d) social class acceptance (questions the meritocracy system that preserves social hierarchies; feels guilty or embarrassed about the unearned social class privileges they have received, but takes no action to address social class inequities), and (e) social class integrated awareness (awareness of how social class system has been personally beneficial; investment in working towards nonclassist policies and practices). These hypothesized attitudinal stages formed the basis for the Privileged Social Class Attitudes Scale (PSCAS), which we created and tested in two studies.

At the time of study completion, the team was composed of two graduate students (Murphy and Nikalje) and two faculty members (Allan and Case). Murphy is a U.S. American White cisgender man, who currently identifies as holding an upper-middle class social status, but who grew up experiencing significant socioeconomic marginalization; Nikalje is a South Asian Dalit woman and international student from an upper-middle class family in India. Allan is a White cisgender man who was raised in Canada and identifies as holding an upper-middle class positionality. Case is a White cisgender American woman who identifies as holding a stable upper-middle class status throughout her lifespan. Those positionalities affected how each of the authors approached this work in different ways. While Murphy's understanding of issues related to social class are deeply shaped by his past experiences of poverty and his upward social mobility, Nikalje, Allan, and Case's social class privilege was consistent across their lifespans, although they each reflected their attitudes towards that privilege shifted considerably throughout their development. What is more, Murphy, Allan, and Case all reflected on the ways in which their Whiteness shaped their social class experiences. In Murphy's experience, being White facilitated his upward mobility; in Allan and Case's experiences, Whiteness enabled both their parents' attainment of an upper-middle class status and their own maintenance of that status.

Study 1

The goals of Study 1 were to create a large pool of items, reviewed by experts, to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and eliminate items for a final scale. Our team generated an initial pool of 87 items relevant to privileged social class attitudes. We then had three scholars with expertise in social class

in psychology review the items for conceptual relevance, content validity, and clarity. These items were initially grouped into five attitudinal profiles: social class blindness (18 items), social class prejudice (12 items), social class acknowledgement (16 items), social class acceptance (21 items), and social class integrated awareness (20 items).

Participants

Participants included 369 adults who ranged in age from 19 to 84 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 53.43$, $SD = 17.05$). Regarding race or ethnicity, the majority were White/European American ($n = 322$, 87.3%), followed by multiracial ($n = 22$, 6.0%), Black/African American ($n = 12$, 3.3%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 3$, 0.8%), Hispanic/Latinx American ($n = 3$, 0.8%), other ($n = 5$, 1.4%); two individuals (0.5%) did not specify their race. In terms of gender, participants self-identified as women ($n = 256$, 69.4%), men ($n = 107$, 29.0%), nonbinary ($n = 3$, 0.8%), queer ($n = 1$, 0.03%), gender queer female ($n = 1$, 0.03%); one individual (0.03%) did not specify their gender. For education, 0.8% ($n = 3$) had a high school diploma, 3.0% ($n = 11$) had a trade or vocational school diploma, 7.0% ($n = 26$) had some college, 40.4% ($n = 149$) had a college degree, and 48.8% ($n = 180$) had a professional or graduate degree. For annual household income, 2.4% ($n = 9$) reported less than \$25,000, 10.6% ($n = 39$) reported between \$26,000 and \$50,000, 16.8% ($n = 62$) reported between \$51,000 and \$75,000, 20.6% ($n = 76$) reported between \$76,000 and \$100,000, 12.5% ($n = 46$) reported between \$101,000 and \$125,000, 7.9% ($n = 29$) reported between \$126,000 and \$150,000, 8.9% ($n = 33$) reported between \$151,000 and \$175,000, 5.4% ($n = 20$) reported between \$176,000 and \$200,000, 14.1% ($n = 52$) reported more than \$200,000, and 0.8% ($n = 3$) did not provide data on annual household income. Participants reported their current subjective social class as middle class ($n = 176$, 47.7%), upper-middle class ($n = 173$, 46.9%), and upper class ($n = 20$, 5.4%).

Instruments

Participants responded to the initial pool of 87 items for the PSCAS on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We also collected demographic information, such as age, gender, race and/or ethnicity, employment status, degree level, household income, and social class.

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited through ResearchMatch, an online national registry that matches volunteers

with research studies and clinical trials (Beevers et al., 2017). We posted the survey link to the ResearchMatch website, which provided prospective participants with information about the study, informed consent, and compensation. To participate, individuals had to (a) be over 18 years of age and (b) identify as having a higher subjective social class (i.e., “How would you identify your current social class?”). We used subjective social class as an inclusion criterion rather than traditional measures of social class (e.g., income) as traditional measures do not necessarily capture perceived social status (Diemer et al., 2017). As such, to assess attitudinal profiles of individuals who perceive themselves as holding social class privilege, we relied on subjective social class. Participants received no compensation for their involvement in the study. The survey, which consisted of demographic questions and our item pool, was presented only after participants voluntarily selected “agree” to participate in the study. The initial sample consisted of 454 adults. However, 56 did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., selected lower or working class) and 29 had missing data, these cases were removed.

Analysis Plan

To reduce the item pool, we first conducted an EFA with principal axis factor extraction and promax rotation in SPSS. We also used parallel analysis to test the factor structure of 1,000 random datasets with 95 percentile values and used principal axis factoring (O'Connor, 2000). Following the EFA, we removed items with low absolute values of pattern matrix loadings ($< .32$), low communalities ($< .40$), and high cross-loadings (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). We also evaluated content validity and conceptual consistency of items. We continued to run EFAs and trim items until we observed clear factors with a concise number of items per factor (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006).

Results

Before analyzing the data, we examined item endorsement frequencies for the 87 items in the pool. All Likert response options were selected at least once for each item, and the endorsement frequency for the options selected the fewest times for each item ranged from 0.3% to 10.3% of the sample. Only two items had an option endorsed only once, but these items were removed in the following analysis. The first EFA yielded fifteen factors explaining 58.66% of the variance, while parallel analysis suggested only eight factors. We removed 29 items following the guidelines discussed above (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). The second EFA yielded 10 factors explaining 57.31% of the variance, but parallel analysis still suggested eight factors. We removed three items, and the third EFA resulted in nine factors explaining 64.69% of the variance. Parallel analysis

suggested seven factors. We removed five items, and the fourth EFA suggested nine factors explaining 66.12% of the variance. Parallel analysis still suggested seven factors. We removed an additional 10 items, and the fifth EFA suggested seven factors explaining 66.05% of the variance. Parallel analysis also suggested seven factors, and the seven factors were conceptually clear but somewhat different from our initial item groupings.

Specifically, although the first four factors aligned with the theoretically based statuses we developed (social class prejudice, social class acknowledgement, social class acceptance, and social class integrated awareness), the social class blindness items failed to form a factor. Moreover, certain aspects that we assumed to be a part of these attitudinal profiles fell into separate, independent subscales: social class identity centrality, social class guilt, and social class fortune. We retained these scales as relevant social class variables, even though they were not attached to any specific attitudinal profile. Therefore, the final four attitudinal profile subscales were slightly different than originally intended: social class prejudice (idealizes higher social classes while denigrating people from lower social classes; explicit classist attitudes), social class acknowledgement (beginning to acknowledge that social class affects opportunities but downplays its effects; believes that social class differences might exist but believes in the myth of the meritocracy and that hard work overcomes social class disparities), social class awareness (awareness about class systems and how they affect people's access to opportunities), and social class action (investment in working towards anti-classist policies and practices in larger society and advocates for more equitable allocation of capital and resources).

To create a concise and practical scale that researchers could use without risking participant fatigue, we aimed to have three items for each subscale. Therefore, we removed 19 additional items in two iterations resulting in a final scale of 21 items. The EFA for the final scale revealed a five-factor solution based on the raw data eigenvalues (55.05% of the variance explained), but the parallel analysis retained seven factors. To align with the parallel analysis, we forced the EFA to extract seven factors, and these represented the clear conceptual distinctions discussed previously (see [Appendix A](#) for the final scale). All items loaded onto their factors at high values with little to no cross-loadings and good estimated internal consistencies: social class prejudice (factor loadings: .66–.89; ω = .86), social class acknowledgement (factor loadings: .64–.82; ω = .82), social class awareness (factor loadings: .61–.83; ω = .81), social class action (factor loadings: .61–.75; ω = .76), social class identity centrality (factor loadings: .73–.77; ω = .80), social class guilt (factor loadings: .74–.91; ω = .84), and social class fortune (factor loadings: .66–.81; ω = .79).

[Table 1](#) displays the Pearson correlations among the subscales from the raw data and their descriptive statistics. As expected, prejudice was positively

Table 1. Correlations Among Social Class Status Subscales from Study 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Prejudice	—						
2. Acknowledgement	.51**	—					
3. Awareness	-.57**	-.60**	—				
4. Action	-.38**	-.46**	.38**	—			
5. Identity Centrality	-.15**	-.32**	.36**	.18**	—		
6. Guilt	-.30**	-.43**	.33**	.27**	.17**	—	
7. Fortune	-.18**	-.24**	.35**	.18**	.39**	.12*	—
<i>M</i>	1.89	4.26	5.65	4.32	4.03	2.93	5.38
<i>SD</i>	1.13	1.50	1.32	1.34	1.43	1.37	1.08

Note. Means and standard deviations (SD) are from average scores.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

correlated with acknowledgement (.51) and negatively correlated with awareness (–.57) and action (–.38). Acknowledgement was also negatively correlated with awareness (–.60) and action (–.46). Action was positively correlated with action (.38). Identity, guilt, and fortune all had consistent negative correlations with prejudice and acknowledgement and positive correlations with awareness and action.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to conduct confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test the factor structure of the PSCAS and to evaluate the scale's construct validity. For construct validity, we chose upward classism, downward classism, internalized classism, critical consciousness (perceived inequity, critical action, and egalitarianism), social desirability, just world beliefs, and social dominance beliefs. We predicted that classist experiences and beliefs (upward classism, downward classism, internalized classism), just world beliefs, and social dominance would positively correlate with prejudice and acknowledgment and negatively correlate with awareness and action. In contrast, we predicted that the critical consciousness constructs would negatively correlate with prejudice and acknowledgment and positively correlate with awareness and action, particularly when the constructs aligned conceptually (e.g., social class awareness and perceived inequity; social class action and perceived inequity). Finally, we assessed whether social desirability contaminated the attitude variables, although we expected no significant correlations here. We did not form specific predictions for social class identity, guilt, and fortune because we initially did not intend to create these subscales.

Method

Participants. Participants for Study 2 included 389 individuals who ranged in age from 20 to 72 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.27$, $SD = 10.77$). Regarding race or ethnicity, most were White/European American ($n = 219$, 56.3%), followed by Black/African American ($n = 106$, 27.2%), Hispanic/Latinx American ($n = 22$, 5.7%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 21$, 5.4%), multiracial ($n = 18$, 4.6%), and American Indian/Native American/First Nation ($n = 3$, 0.8%). In terms of gender, participants self-identified as women ($n = 139$, 35.7%), men ($n = 244$, 62.7%), and six (1.5%) did not specify their gender. For education, 0.3% ($n = 1$) had some high school, 8.0% ($n = 31$) had a high school diploma, 3.1% ($n = 12$) had a trade or vocational school diploma, 14.7% ($n = 57$) had some college, 55.3% ($n = 215$) had a college degree, and 18.8% ($n = 73$) had a professional or graduate degree. For annual household income, 2.1% ($n = 8$) reported less than \$25,000, 19.0% ($n = 74$) reported between \$26,000 and \$50,000, 33.9% ($n = 132$) reported between \$51,000 and \$75,000, 24.4% ($n = 95$) reported between \$76,000 and \$100,000, 6.7% ($n = 26$) reported between \$101,000 and \$125,000, 7.2% ($n = 28$) reported between \$126,000 and \$150,000, 2.8% ($n = 11$) reported between \$151,000 and \$175,000, 0.8% ($n = 3$) reported between \$176,000 and \$200,000, 2.8% ($n = 11$) reported more than \$200,000, and 0.3% ($n = 1$) did not provide data on annual household income. Participants reported their current subjective social class as middle class ($n = 248$, 63.8%), upper-middle class ($n = 105$, 27.0%), and upper class ($n = 36$, 9.3%).

Procedures. Participants joined the study through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform where participants complete surveys for compensation. Research suggests that data collected via MTurk is as reliable and valid as other recruitment methods (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Sprouse, 2011). We posted a link to the MTurk website, which provided prospective participants with information about the study, informed consent, and compensation. To participate, individuals had to (a) be over 18 years old, and (b) identify as having a higher social class. Participants received \$2.00 for their involvement in the study. The initial sample consisted of 653 people. However, we removed 203 cases that did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., selected lower or working class), 21 that did not pass the validity check, 18 that only provided demographic information, 16 that completed the survey in an impossible duration, and four that declined to participate.

Instruments

Social Class Attitudes. The final 21 items of the PSCAS derived from Study 1 were responded to on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These items comprised seven subscales,

including the four social class attitude subscales and the three additional scales (see [Appendix A](#) for subscale descriptions). The estimated internal reliability of the final subscales were all acceptable (social class prejudice [$\alpha = .92$], social class acknowledgement [$\alpha = .73$], social class awareness [$\alpha = .74$], social class action [$\alpha = .84$], social class identity centrality [$\alpha = .92$], social class guilt [$\alpha = .94$], and social class fortune [$\alpha = .84$]).

Internalized Classism. Internalized classism was measured using an unpublished scale by [Liu and Hernandez \(2007\)](#). The 30-item instrument assesses the extent to which one experiences thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to maintaining their social class status and worldview. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: “I buy the right things to fit in with my social class group,” and “I am conscious of how I behave around others because it reflects my social class.” Scales scores predicted variables consistent with theory (e.g., distress, affect; [Liu & Hernandez, 2007](#)), and the estimated internal consistency in the present study was $\alpha = .98$.

Perceived Upward Classism. Perceived upward classism was measured using the upward classism subscale of the Perceived Classism Scale ([Hernandez, 2013](#)). The 6-item subscale assesses participants’ perceptions of being targets of classism based on their higher social class membership. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: “People commented that you are privileged,” and “people commented that you acted like you are better than them because you had more money than them.” [Hernandez \(2013\)](#) found the subscale to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$) and correlate with theoretically similar constructs in expected directions (e.g., social status). The estimated internal consistency in the present study was $\alpha = .95$.

Downward Classism. We used the downward classism subscale of the Classism Attitudinal Profile to measure negative attitudes or behaviors by people with higher social classes used to marginalize people in lower social classes ([Colbow et al., 2016](#)). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: “People who are poor try to abuse the system,” and “people who are blue collar are less refined compared to most other groups.” [Colbow et al. \(2016\)](#) found the subscale to have acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .80$) and correlate with theoretically similar constructs in expected directions (e.g., protestant work ethic). In the present study, the subscale had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

Critical Consciousness. The Critical Consciousness Scale was used to assess participants' abilities to critically analyze social conditions and commit to actions that address inequities (Diemer et al., 2017). The 22-item scale has three subscales: perceived inequity, critical action, and egalitarianism. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on the perceived inequity and egalitarianism subscales, and on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never did this*) to 5 (*at least once a week*) on the critical action subscale. Sample items include: "Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead" (perceived inequity), "all groups should be given an equal chance in life" (egalitarianism), and "signed an email or written petition about a social or political issue" (critical action). Diemer et al. (2017) found the subscale scores to have good internal consistency (i.e., alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .90) and to load onto three distinct factors. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Social Desirability. We used the Marlowe-Crowe Form C Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982) to assess participants' tendency to respond to survey items in socially favorable ways. Participants responded to each of the 11 items by selecting "*true*" or "*false*." Sample items include, "I am always willing to admit it when I make a mistake," and "I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable." Reynolds (1982) found the scale to have acceptable internal reliability and correlate with other measures of social desirability. This scale had acceptable internal reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .74$).

Just World Beliefs. We used the eight-item justice for others subscale of the Just World Scale (Lucas et al., 2011) to measure the extent to which people believe the world is a just and fair place for others. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include, "Regardless of the specific outcomes they receive, people are subjected to fair procedures" (procedural justice for others), and "I feel that people generally earn the rewards and punishments that they get in this world" (distributive justice for others). Lucas et al. (2011) found the scale to have good internal consistency (i.e., alpha coefficients ranging from .79–.93) and correlate with other measures of just world beliefs. In the present study, the scale had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$).

Social Dominance Orientation. We used the 16-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto et al., 1994) to measure the extent to which people prefer hierarchical and unequal relationships among groups of people. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to items such as "It's OK if some groups have

more of a chance in life than others,” and “Increased social equality is beneficial to society” (reverse coded). Pratto et al. (1994) found the scale to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$) and correlate with theoretically related constructs in expected directions (e.g., authoritarianism). In the present study, the scale had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Data Analysis Plan. To evaluate the scale in the second sample, we used CFA in Mplus 8 with robust maximum likelihood (MLR; Muthén & Muthén, 2017). For fit indices, we used the chi-square test (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). We examined four different factor structures: a correlated multifactor model (each factor correlated among one another), a single factor model (each indicator in each construct load onto a single factor), a higher order model (each of the latent factors regressed onto a higher order), and a bifactor model (items for each scale load onto their respective specific factor and a general factor). In addition to absolute fit indices, we compared models with the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test, which is necessary when using MLR (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). For construct validity, we correlated each subscale with the validity scales in SPSS. Next, we tested measurement configural, metric, and scalar invariance across dummy codes for gender (0 = *man*; 1 = *woman*), income (0 ≤ \$75,000; 1 ≥ \$75,000), social class (0 = *middle class*; 1 = *upper middle class* and *upper class*), and level of education (0 = *less than college degree*; 1 = *college degree or higher*). We assessed whether there was a significant change in chi-square and whether CFI changed more than .01 (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Finally, as noted next, we conducted post hoc moderation analysis in SPSS.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Values of skewness (−1.00 to 0.50) and kurtosis (−1.38 to 1.52) were within acceptable ranges (Weston & Gore, 2006). We did not identify any outlier scores. For missing data, 388 (99.7%) participants had complete data and one (0.3%) participant had missing data. Therefore, we considered the amount of missing data negligible and used full information maximum likelihood to handle missing data in Mplus (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). We used pairwise deletion for missing data when using SPSS.

Model Testing

The correlated multifactor model had excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(168) = 308.27$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.04, .05], and SRMR = .05, and all

indicators loaded on their factors at values of .48 and above. The single factor model had much worse fit than the correlational model, $\chi^2(189) = 2,371.57, p < .001$, CFI = .49, RMSEA = .17, 90% CI [.17, .18], and SRMR = .15; $\Delta\chi^2(21) = 1,551.86, p < .001$. The higher order model also had significantly worse fit than the correlational model, $\chi^2(182) = 679.05, p < .001$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .08, 90% CI [.08, .09], and SRMR = .11; $\Delta\chi^2(14) = 380.003, p < .001$. Finally, the bifactor model also had poor fit to the data, $\chi^2(168) = 623.80, p < .001$, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .08, 90% CI [.08, .09], and SRMR = .10. Therefore, the correlational model was the best fitting model.

Construct Validity

Table 2 depicts the correlations among the social class identity status variables and the construct validity variables. Prejudice expectedly correlated positively with downward classism (.80), internalized classism (.67), just world beliefs (.66), and social dominance (.70) and correlated negatively with egalitarianism (−.43). Prejudice correlated with acknowledgement (.60) but had no relation with awareness (−.09). Surprisingly and unlike in Study 1, prejudice correlated with social class action (.35) and critical action (.62). Acknowledgement had moderate to large positive relations with downward classism (.45), internalized classism (.43), just world beliefs (.64), and social dominance (.39) and small to moderate negative correlations with inequality (−.16) and egalitarianism (−.25). It did not have a significant correlation with awareness but had a small positive relation with action (.10). Awareness surprisingly had small positive relations with downward classism (.10) and internalized classism (.21) but had expected positive relations with perceived inequality (.70), egalitarianism (.47), and critical action (.27), no relation with just world beliefs, and a negative relation with social dominance (−.26). Action also surprisingly had positive relations with downward classism (.35), internalized classism (.54), just world beliefs (.23), and social dominance (.11) but had the expected positive correlations with perceived inequality (.52), egalitarianism (.23), critical action (.69). No social class status variables correlated with social desirability, except for awareness, which had a small negative relation (−.11). Income had no relations with any status variable, except action (−.17, $p = .001$).

As variables of secondary interest, social class identity centrality had large correlations with classism, particularly internalized classism (.75). It also had large correlations with critical action (.53), just world beliefs (.51), and social dominance (.40). Guilt had large correlations with classism, particularly upward classism (.74). It also had a surprisingly large correlation with critical action (.82). Fortune also had moderate to large positive correlations with most variables, such as internalized classism (.46).

Table 2. Correlations among Study 2 Variables for Construct Validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Prejudice	—															
2. Acknowledgement	.60**	—														
3. Awareness	-.09	-.10	—													
4. Action	.35**	.10*	.38**	—												
5. Identity	.58**	.44**	.23**	.51**	—											
6. Guilt	.60**	.18**	.24**	.68**	.49**	—										
7. Fortune	.28**	.31**	.30**	.36**	.47**	.23**	—									
8. Upward classism	.66**	.35**	.15**	.57**	.56**	.74**	.32**	—								
9. Downward classism	.80**	.45**	.10*	.35**	.59**	.61**	.27**	.75**	—							
10. Internalized classism	.67**	.43**	.21**	.54**	.75**	.65**	.46**	.73**	.73**	—						
11. Inequality	-.06	-.16*	.70**	.52**	.21**	.39**	.25**	.26**	.12*	.25**	—					
12. Egalitarianism	-.43**	-.25**	.47**	.23**	-.11*	-.05	.04	-.22**	-.36**	-.20**	.56**	—				
13. Critical action	.62**	.27**	.27**	.69**	.53**	.82**	.29**	.78**	.65**	.67**	.41**	-.05	—			
14. Social desirability	-.06	.02	-.11*	.08	-.06	-.05	-.09	-.09	-.18**	-.17*	-.07	.12*	.004	—		
15. Just world	.66**	.64**	-.03	.23**	.51**	.38**	.32**	.49**	.56**	.55**	-.05	-.24**	.42**	.01	—	
16. Social dominance	.70**	.39**	-.26**	.11*	.40**	.43**	.12**	.55**	.68**	.54**	-.29**	-.83**	.43**	-.13**	.47**	—
Mean	3.76	5.17	5.29	4.26	4.49	3.38	5.22	3.11	3.89	4.15	5.07	5.21	2.36	.47	4.74	3.10
SD	1.81	1.17	1.16	1.62	1.62	1.94	1.16	1.57	1.71	1.55	1.34	1.32	1.25	.25	1.32	1.30

Note. Means and standard deviations (SD) are from average scores.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Regression Examining Just World Beliefs as a Moderator of Social Class Prejudice and Social Class Action

Variables	β	B	SE B	p	R	R ²	R ² Δ	F
<i>Step 1</i>								
Prejudice	.52	0.47	.07	< .001				
Just world beliefs	.01	0.004	.03	.896				
Social dominance	−.26	−0.06	.02	< .001	.39	.15	.15**	23.11**
<i>Step 2</i>								
Prejudice	.26	0.23	.07	.001				
Just world beliefs	.24	0.11	.03	< .001				
Social dominance	−.06	−0.01	.01	.347				
Prejudice X Just World	.41	2.03	.27	< .001				
Prejudice X Soc. Dom.	.08	0.50	.30	.096	.56	.30	.16**	34.72**

**p < .01.

Measurement Invariance

Table 4 displays the measurement invariance tests for the PSCAS across dummy codes for gender, income, social class, and level of education. As seen in the table, the PSCAS demonstrated metric and scalar invariance across all these variables.

Post Hoc Analyses

Given the unexpected correlations between prejudice and action, we sought to explore for whom prejudice related to action. Specifically, we tested just world beliefs and social dominance as moderators, predicting that prejudice would relate to action only for those high in just world beliefs and social dominance. We entered terms in two steps. In Step 1, we entered the predictors, and in Step 2, we entered the centered interaction terms. As seen in Table 3, only prejudice (.52) and social dominance (−.26) predicted action in Step 1. In Step 2, only the prejudice by just world beliefs predicted action (.41), predicting a large amount of additional variance (16%) for a total of 30% of the variance explained in action. Figure 1 depicts the interaction effect. Prejudice was only positively related to action for those high in just world beliefs. Those low in just world beliefs had a negative relation between prejudice and action.

Discussion

The purpose of this two-part study was to design and validate a measure of social class attitudes for individuals with privileged social class identities.

Table 4. Invariance Tests of the PSCAS Across Gender, Income, Social Class, and Level of Education

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p
Gender						
Configural	491.14	336	.964	—	—	—
Metric	509.17	350	.963	17.74	14	.219
Scalar	526.08	364	.963	16.50	14	.284
Income						
Configural	500.79	336	.963	—	—	—
Metric	517.47	350	.962	16.147	14	.305
Scalar	530.63	364	.963	12.124	14	.596
Social Class						
Configural	482.06	336	.967	—	—	—
Metric	497.23	350	.967	14.83	14	.390
Scalar	519.37	364	.965	22.55	14	.068
Level of Education						
Configural	593.11	336	.943	—	—	—
Metric	610.19	350	.942	16.92	14	.260
Scalar	620.39	364	.943	8.96	14	.834

Note. Gender (0 = man; 1 = woman), income ($0 \leq \$75,000$; $1 \geq \$75,000$), social class (0 = middle class; 1 = upper-middle class and upper class), and level of education (0 = less than college degree; 1 = college degree or higher).

Currently, no such measure exists, other than classism scales, which makes it difficult for researchers and practitioners to conceptualize, support, and study the implications of social class attitudes for individuals with social class privilege. Based on this need, we developed the 21-item PSCAS, which was reliable and structurally consistent across two studies. However, results also pointed to unexpected correlations between certain subscales, suggesting individual scale items may be differentially interpreted by individuals with varying just world attitudes.

Analyses supported seven factors measuring four core social class attitude subscales (prejudice, acknowledgement, awareness, and action) and three additional scales that assess individuals' feelings about their social class standing (identity centrality, guilt, and fortune). Confirmatory analyses in Study 2 also supported a correlational structure among these subscales, rather than structures capturing a general factor, which is consistent with previous research and theory. In addition, internal consistency for all subscales was adequate to good and no subscales correlated in a meaningful way with a measure of social desirability. As anticipated, the awareness and action subscales were positively related to perceived inequality, egalitarianism, and critical action. The prejudice and acknowledgement subscales also correlated

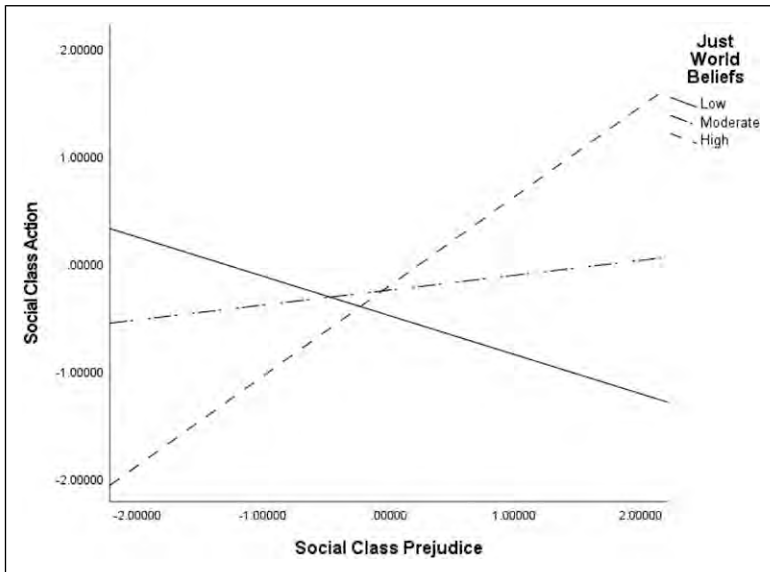


Figure 1. Moderation of Social Class Prejudice and Social Class Action by Just World Beliefs.

Note. Just world beliefs groups based on less than -0.50 standard deviations (SDs) from the mean, between -0.50 and 0.50 SDs from the mean, and greater than 0.50 SDs from the mean.

in expected directions with downward classism, internalized classism, just world beliefs, and social dominance and correlated negatively with egalitarianism. These findings align with previous research suggesting that individuals who are less aware of their privilege are more likely to endorse beliefs that the world is a fair place and that their cultural group is superior (e.g., Kestner, 2009). This is especially the case for White participants, who comprised most of our studies' samples.

Despite these expected results, we found unanticipated correlations between the social class action subscale and multiple other measures in Study 2. In addition to unexpectedly correlating with the prejudice subscale, the social class action subscale had surprising positive relations with measures of downward classism, internalized classism, just world beliefs, and social dominance. These findings may have occurred because the structure of the items do not indicate whether the classism being referenced is upward or downward ("I speak up in a group situation when I feel that someone is being classist," "I see it as my responsibility to address social class inequities," and "I teach others about social class and classism"). As a result, some participants may have interpreted the items to be about upward classism that they themselves may perceive or experience. Therefore, some individuals,

particularly individuals who believe in a just world, may indeed speak up or teach others about upward classism when they feel someone is being classist toward them (e.g., accusing them of being an elite or snob; [Liu, 2012b](#)).

The post hoc analysis supports these conclusions: we found significant positive relations between prejudice and action for participants high in just world beliefs but significant negative relations between these same variables for participants low in just world beliefs. Social class inequities and classism are deeply engrained in the United States, and have grown and become more explicit since the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic ([Adams et al., 2016](#); [Horowitz et al., 2020](#); [Reeves & Rothwell, 2020](#)). In this context, people may be particularly motivated to maintain their social class status and worldview ([Liu, 2012b](#)). Therefore, people who hold prejudicial attitudes towards individuals from lower social classes and who believe we live in a just world may feel motivated to act against upward classism to maintain their social class standing. Taken together, the prejudice, acknowledgement, and awareness operated expectedly in both studies and are therefore valid for use in future research. However, researchers should use the action subscale with caution, understanding that different populations will understand it differently. Likewise, the identity centrality, guilt, and fortune subscales are useful for capturing different aspects of social class, and researchers can use them individually in future studies.

Limitations

The key limitation in the current study was the divergence between the two samples, which resulted in different results. In Study 1, we recruited from ResearchMatch, which resulted in a sample of participants who were overwhelmingly White (90%), highly educated (48.8% with a professional or graduate degree), and mostly women (70%). Furthermore, other studies have found two-thirds of participants on ResearchMatch identify as liberal, with only a quarter identifying as conservative ([Pogge & Smith, 2020](#)). Therefore, the sample in which we developed our initial scale was mostly White women who were highly educated and likely liberal. The racial composition of this group is not necessarily surprising given the relationship between social class, education, and race in the United States. However, because our sample was likely not representative of the racial and/or ethnic makeup of the higher social classes, future research should intentionally recruit more diverse samples to test the generalizability of our findings. What was clear from the results was that this population did represent more people with acknowledgement and awareness attitudinal profiles and also resulted in findings that aligned with our expectations (e.g., action being negatively correlated with prejudice). In contrast, the MTurk sample was more diverse in terms of race and education and had a smaller proportion of women (36%). Moreover, in contrast to

ResearchMatch, MTurk samples produce a representative distribution of political ideology in the United States (Clifford et al., 2015). Given the different representation of worldviews in Study 2, we had much different results, with unexpected correlations (e.g., action and prejudice). Relatedly, the use of two different recruitment platforms introduced a chance that data from the same person could have been used in both the EFA and CFA. Although this is a potential limitation, it is highly unlikely. A final limitation related to our data includes the potential presence of bots on the MTurk platform in Study 2. Although we used validity checks, it is still possible that the data is contaminated and replication needs to occur.

These results also represented the bias of our team, with our worldviews likely aligning with participants from Study 1. As we indicated in the methods section, our team varied along multiple domains regarding our cultural identities, including our past and current subjective social class. Because of this, from the beginning of the scale development process, we took steps to reflect on and discuss our positionalities, biases, and presumptions. Despite this intentional reflection and discussion, our presumptions ended up shaping item development in ways that were not evident to us until after our data had been analyzed. For example, all our team members—regardless of our cultural identities—presumed the items for the social class action subscale were referencing downward classism and did not consider the items could be interpreted as acting against upward classism. Taken together, this limits the use of the action subscale, and researchers should be careful to interpret its meaning in certain samples.

We also intentionally utilized subjective social class, rather than objective indicators of social class, to select participants. This decision was made based on considerable evidence gathered in recent years that subjective social class has a stronger and more consistent relationship with psychological factors than objective indicators of social class (see Huang et al., 2017). However, had we selected participants based on objective indicators (e.g., income), our results may have differed. Future research may explore whether scale results are similar when objective indicators are utilized to identify individuals with social class privilege.

Finally, the scale is also limited in exploring how social class attitudes are shaped and experienced in relation to different social identities, particularly race. For example, social class is inseparable from race and racism in the United States (Liu, 2012b), so the experience of privileged social class will undoubtedly vary depending on racial, and other, identities. Given that privilege in the United States is seated in White supremacy, it is difficult to untangle how the results were shaped by participants' racial backgrounds. Although our sample sizes were not large enough to conduct invariance tests, this is an important direction for future research to determine whether the scale functions similarly across racially different groups.

Implications for Education, Training, Practice, Research, and Advocacy

Practice. Research has consistently documented how recognizing the cultural experiences and attitudes of clients enables practitioners to better understand how sociopolitical factors affect clients and how clients make sense of their lived experiences (e.g., [Day-Vines et al., 2007](#)). Therefore, a tool to conceptualize or assess the class-related attitudes of individuals with privileged social class identities may be relevant for practitioners. For example, it may allow clinicians to attend to this identity development process, which may be important for some clients. Specifically, with future research to validate it in clinical populations, the PSCAS may be a useful tool for clinicians to explore with their clients both how they make sense of their privileged social class identity and also how it affects their interactions and worldviews.

Research

Despite the high-quality research that has been conducted to understand the implications of social class for those with privileged social class identities (e.g., [Autin & Allan, 2020](#); [Liu et al., 2007](#)), social class remains under-researched in the field of psychology in comparison to other cultural identities ([American Psychological Association, 2019](#)). This is especially the case when it comes to research on those with social class privilege, perhaps because few scales in this area exist. The current study and resulting scale could help address this gap, providing researchers with a tool to further explore how the attitudes of individuals with social class privilege affect physical, mental, and social well-being as well as educational and occupational outcomes. In addition, researchers could use the measure to better understand how different privileged social class attitudes relate to therapeutic outcomes to inform clinical interventions.

Advocacy

The field of psychology has taken strides to acknowledge social class as an essential cultural variable and integrate social class conceptualizations into clinical practice (e.g., [American Psychological Association, 2019](#)). However, more work is needed to ensure that both scholars and practitioners have the training and resources they need to effectively research and conceptualize the implications of social class for individuals across the social class spectrum and to help people with privilege become more aware of their privilege and power. To advocate for such training and resources, scholars and practitioners need tools. Having a scale focused on privileged social class identity development may allow better advocacy focused on attitudinal change and building awareness for people with privileged social class identities.

Education and Training

As stipulated in the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program (Scheel et al., 2018), our field aims to train professionals who view human functioning through developmental and contextual lenses and who are committed to promoting multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice in science and practice. As such, training attends to culture both as a social phenomenon and as an aspect of identity. In line with these aims, the PSCAS can prepare trainees to understand the diversity of their clients' social class identities and help students with privileged social class identities better understand themselves. Because the majority of mental health practitioners come from privileged social class backgrounds, such reflexivity is essential because denial of privilege can compromise students' abilities to effectively engage with diverse communities (Dunlap et al., 2007).

Beyond the implications of the scale itself, our team's reflections about designing the scale and making sense of evaluation results point to additional implications for education and training. As described in the limitations section, our biases blinded us to how certain scale items could be interpreted. This experience of discovering how our presumptions shaped our research, despite the steps we took to guard against it, has caused all our team members to reflect on our research processes. Although bias in qualitative research is a topic commonly discussed in our field in recent years (e.g. Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007), training on how to reduce bias in all types of research is critical. Moreover, we should encourage both new and seasoned researchers to think carefully about and document the ways they are integrating practices into their research processes to name, acknowledge, and check their biases.

Appendix A

Social class attitude statuses:

- **Social Class Prejudice** — *Idealizes higher social classes while denigrating people from lower social classes; explicit classist attitudes.*
- **Social Class Acknowledgement** — *Beginning to acknowledge that social class affects opportunities but downplays its effects; Believes that social class differences might exist but believes in the myth of the meritocracy and that hard work overcomes social class disparities.*
- **Social Class Awareness** — *Awareness about class systems and how they affect people's access to opportunities.*
- **Social Class Action** — *Investment in working towards anti-classist policies/practices in larger society and advocates for more equitable allocation of capital and resources.*

Social Class Prejudice

1. People are poor because they choose not to work
2. People are poor because they are lazy
3. People in lower social classes are not motivated to work hard

Social Class Acknowledgement

4. People's social class affects their opportunities, but there are still ways for everyone to be successful
5. People in the U.S. might be born with different opportunities, but hard work is still the greatest predictor of success
6. If people work hard, they will be successful

Social Class Awareness

7. The U.S. makes it easier for people from higher social classes to be successful
8. People in lower social classes do not have the same opportunities as people in higher social classes
9. Social class affects people's ability to succeed

Social Class Action

10. I speak up in a group situation when I feel that someone is being classist
11. I see it as my responsibility to address social class inequities
12. I teach others about social class and classism

Other scales:

- **Social Class Identity Centrality** — *Views social class as an important part of identity*
- **Social Class Guilt** — *Feelings of guilt or discomfort about social class status or privilege*
- **Social Class Fortune** — *Feelings of fortune and luck as a result of social class belonging*

Social Class Identity Centrality

1. My social class is an important part of my identity
2. My social class is part of who I am
3. My social class is a central part of my identity

Social Class Guilt

1. I feel guilty about my social class status
2. I am embarrassed about my social class privilege
3. I feel uncomfortable about my social class status

Social Class Fortune

1. I feel fortunate to be a member of my social class group
2. I feel blessed because of the social class I belong to
3. I feel lucky to be in a higher social class

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