

# The Psychology of Entrenched Privilege: High Socioeconomic Status Individuals From Affluent Backgrounds Are Uniquely High in Entitlement

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## Abstract

As rates of intergenerational social mobility decline, it is increasingly important to understand the psychological consequences of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. Here, we explore whether current and childhood socioeconomic status (SES) are interactively related to entitlement, such that among currently high SES individuals, those from affluent backgrounds are likely to feel uniquely high levels of entitlement, whereas currently low SES individuals feel low entitlement regardless of their backgrounds. A meta-analysis of four exploratory studies (total  $N = 3,105$ ) found that currently high SES individuals who were also raised in high SES households were especially inclined to report feeling entitled, a pattern that was robust across three indicators of SES: income, education, and subjective SES. Results of a preregistered, confirmatory study ( $N = 1,058$ ) replicated this interactive pattern for education and subjective SES, though not for income. Our findings highlight the importance of considering current and childhood SES jointly to understand the psychological consequences of SES.

## Keywords

socioeconomic status, income, education, entitlement

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Rates of intergenerational social mobility are declining in many countries (Berman, 2019; Chetty et al., 2017), such that those born into high socioeconomic status (SES) households are increasingly likely to maintain that standing in adulthood, whereas those born into less privileged circumstances are becoming less likely to achieve high SES. It is, therefore, important to understand the psychological effects of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. Do higher SES individuals from affluent backgrounds have different views of themselves and society than others? In particular, might they develop different views than the small portion of individuals who improve their SES (e.g., the 7.5% of U.S. residents born in the bottom quintile of the wealth distribution who move to the top quintile; Chetty et al., 2014)? Understanding the beliefs of “stationary high SES” individuals (i.e., individuals with both currently high SES and high childhood SES) illuminates the potential societal consequences of low social mobility. To the extent that the most privileged members of society are increasingly likely to maintain the socioeconomic standing they are born into, it is important to understand the beliefs associated with entrenched privilege.

We know relatively little, however, about the psychological tendencies of stationary high SES individuals. Accumulating

research suggests that SES may be systematically related to various attitudes and behaviors (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2012), but this research has rarely examined current and childhood SES simultaneously to identify the potentially unique beliefs of those who have high levels of both, compared with everyone else. In particular, we know little about how stationary high SES individuals differ from upwardly mobile individuals, who have a high SES but come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Here, we explore the possibility that high SES individuals from privileged backgrounds are especially inclined toward feelings of psychological entitlement—beliefs that one is more important and deserving of resources and privileges than others (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Entitlement is arguably

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the most socially detrimental facet of the multidimensional construct of narcissism, because it typically predicts interpersonal difficulties more strongly than the other three facets (i.e., leadership, self-absorption, and superiority; Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015; Emmons, 1984). Entitlement is associated with a host of antisocial behaviors, including greater selfishness and rule-breaking in the workplace, as well as lesser empathy and respect for others (Campbell et al., 2004; Yam et al., 2017; Zitek et al., 2010). For that reason, it is important to identify factors that might lead to high entitlement. Past findings converge to suggest that SES is a candidate antecedent of entitlement (Foster et al., 2003; Piff, 2014; Zitek & Jordan, 2016). We examine the possibility that high SES individuals are especially prone to these feelings if they had privileged backgrounds.

Our investigation increases our understanding of the psychological effects of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. Although past work has considered either childhood SES or current SES, we examine whether they are jointly associated with feelings of entitlement. We specifically extend past research by testing whether individuals with high childhood SES and current SES feel more entitled than others. In addition, we identify the robustness of the findings across indicators of SES by operationalizing SES in both objective (income and education) and subjective terms (self-perceived social rank in a community; Kraus et al., 2012).

## Previous Research on SES and Psychological Entitlement

Several studies have found that higher SES individuals have strong feelings of psychological entitlement. Individuals who have high income (Foster et al., 2003), have high net worth (Leckelt et al., 2019), feel wealthy (Piff, 2014), or self-identify as rich or high SES (Cai et al., 2012; Zitek & Jordan, 2016) feel especially entitled (or have high levels of the broader construct of narcissism). Individuals whose parents had high incomes or wealth also exhibit particularly high levels of entitlement (Chabrol et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2016). From these studies, we can infer that feelings of entitlement are most pronounced among the most privileged members of society. We propose, however, that this inference is incomplete because it fails to consider that some high SES individuals came from disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas others did not.

Sociological models of belief formation suggest that individuals' beliefs arise, in part, from their experiences and reflections about their movement (or lack thereof) in the hierarchy (Blau, 1956; Hollingshead et al., 1954; Martin & Côté, 2019). These models suggest that stationary high SES and upwardly mobile individuals might have different beliefs, including different levels of entitlement. To more completely understand the relationship between SES and entitlement, an interactive approach whereby the relationship between current SES and entitlement varies depending

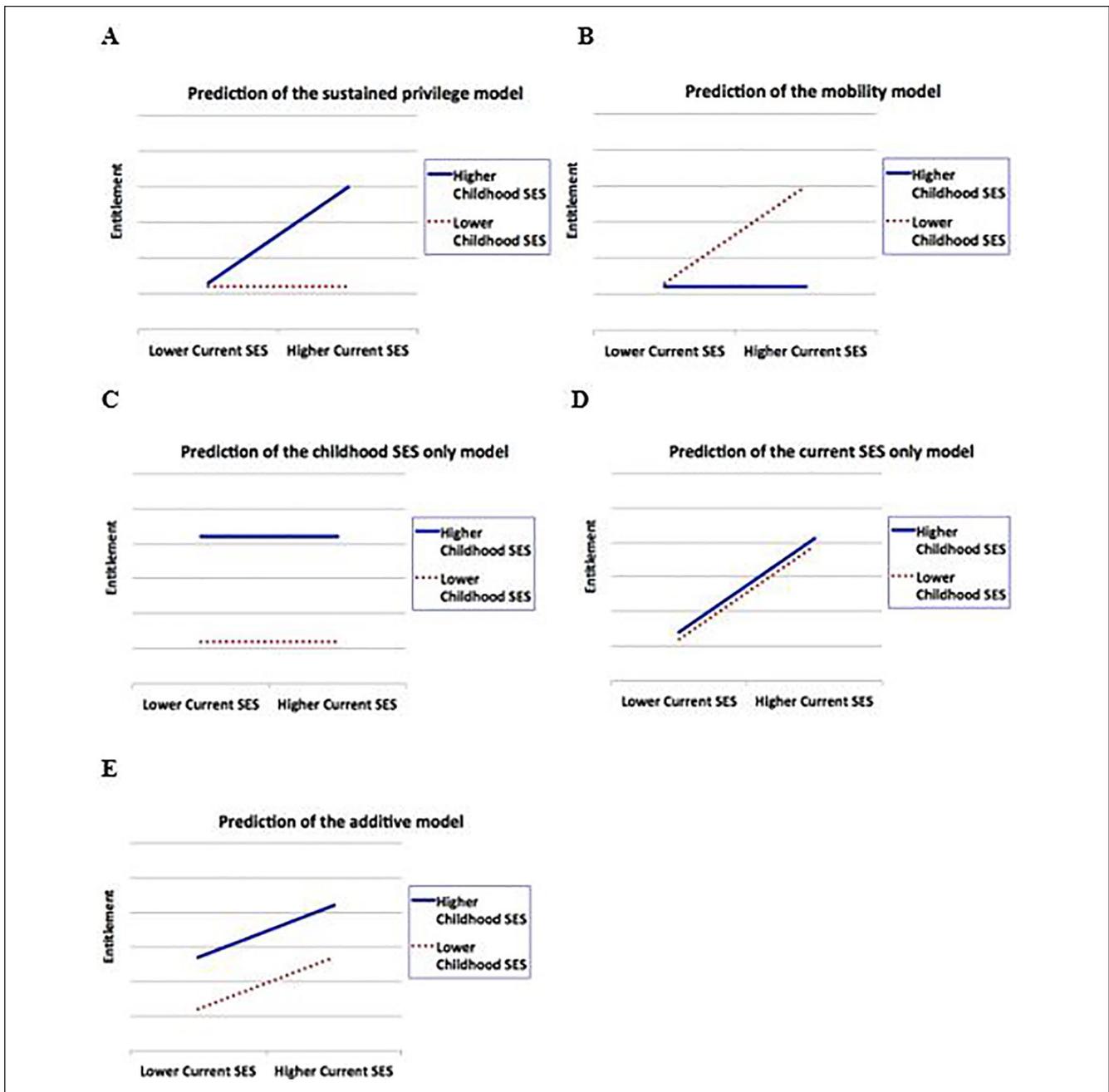
on childhood SES may be particularly informative. To our knowledge, the potential interactive effect of current and childhood SES on entitlement has never been tested. Thus, it remains unknown whether stationary high SES individuals are unique in feeling highly entitled to resources and privileges.

In the present research, we develop and test a sustained privilege model of SES and entitlement that posits that individuals with both high current SES and high childhood SES have especially high feelings of entitlement. We also consider competing theoretical possibilities for the relation between current SES, childhood SES, and entitlement, including the possibility that upwardly mobile individuals feel the most entitled. The patterns of interaction predicted by each of the five models appear in Figure 1.

## The Sustained Privilege Model: Greater Entitlement Among Individuals With High Current and Childhood SES

Stationary high SES individuals may develop uniquely strong feelings of entitlement for several reasons. First, feelings of cultural superiority—feelings that one's preferences and activities are highly sophisticated and refined—may lead stationary high SES individuals to feel entitled. Cultural theories of inequality propose that SES is associated with several characteristics, with individuals from different class backgrounds exhibiting different preferences and activities across domains such as art, dining, and work (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 2011; Rivera, 2016). Higher SES individuals view activities such as international travel, classical music, and golf—activities that are difficult for lower SES individuals to access—as markers of sophistication and refinement. Stationary high SES individuals may develop particularly strong feelings of cultural superiority because their continual resources and exposure to high SES social networks and cultural environments have reinforced the notion that highbrow activities are inherently better (Lareau, 2011; Rahman Khan, 2012; Rivera, 2016). Furthermore, they lack exposure to lower SES environments that could dispel the notion that the activities associated with a high SES standing are inherently superior. In turn, feelings of cultural superiority could lead stationary high SES individuals to view themselves as more worthy of superior treatment and rewards, causing high levels of entitlement. By contrast, upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals may feel less culturally superior and, thus, less entitled, because their exposure to low SES networks and environments may have dispelled the notion that highbrow activities are inherently better.

Second, stationary high SES individuals may feel highly entitled because they believe that they have higher capabilities and work harder, and, thus, have higher social worth. People better understand the elements of a particular social group the more they interact with members of that social



**Figure 1.** Patterns predicted by each of the five competing models of current SES, childhood SES, and entitlement.  
 Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

group (Hong et al., 2000; Zhu et al., 2016). Stationary high SES individuals might have the least accurate knowledge of lower SES environments because they have had continually high standing throughout their lives. In particular, they might fail to comprehend the external constraints faced by lower SES individuals, such as lacking access to valuable social networks, and the efforts they must exert to tackle these constraints. Stationary high SES individuals might form especially unfavorable attributions of lower SES individuals' standing. They may believe that they have more developed

capabilities and work harder than them, which would cause them to believe they have high social worth and feel entitled to more resources and rewards than others. For example, in past research, an experimentally manipulated belief that one has strong creative skills enhanced feelings of entitlement (Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016). By contrast, upwardly and downwardly mobile and stationary low SES individuals have more exposure to the constraints faced by lower SES individuals and, therefore, might perceive that capabilities and effort are needed in both high and low SES environments.

This perception could prevent them from inferring that they have superior social worth and from feeling entitled.

Third, stationary high SES individuals may feel highly entitled because they expect that they will continue to acquire resources with relatively little effort, as they have become accustomed to throughout their lives. Stationary high SES individuals acquire more resources than others beginning at a young age (Lareau, 2011) and continuing into adulthood (e.g., in the job search process; Rivera, 2011). People develop expectations for the future from past events and experiences (Bandura, 1986). Thus, people who have consistently acquired resources more easily than others will likely expect to receive them easily in the future. If individuals never leave a high standing position, there is no opportunity or motivation to unlearn the expectation that they will continue to acquire resources with relatively little effort. Research finds that overparenting—a pattern in which parents try to resolve all of their children’s problems and remove obstacles in their way—facilitates the development of entitlement because children learn to expect that others will also help them in the future (Givertz & Segrin, 2014; Segrin et al., 2012). Similarly, evidence suggests that individuals who receive lenient treatment from others become entitled to more favorable treatment from others in the future (Zitek & Krause, 2019). Thus, stationary high SES individuals’ expectations that they will continue to acquire resources without the same level of effort as a person from a lower class position might give rise to entitlement to rewards and resources in the future. By contrast, people who have experienced deprivation in their lives might not develop the same expectation of acquiring resources with relatively little effort, and may not feel entitled.

Because of the processes outlined above, the sustained privilege model posits that feelings of entitlement to more privileges and resources are especially pronounced among stationary high SES individuals. This should be reflected in an interaction between current and childhood SES, so that the positive association between current SES and entitlement is more pronounced among individuals with higher childhood SES than among individuals with lower childhood SES. In addition, childhood SES should be positively associated with entitlement among currently higher SES individuals, but not currently lower SES individuals.<sup>1</sup> This interaction can be seen in Panel A of Figure 1, where those with high current and childhood SES feel more entitled than everyone else.

### **The Mobility Model: Greater Entitlement Among Individuals With Lower Childhood SES and Higher Current SES**

Another possibility that we examine is the rival prediction that upwardly mobile individuals are uniquely high in entitlement. Upwardly mobile individuals are sometimes portrayed as “new money” or “nouveau riche”—social categories stereotypically associated with vulgar tastes and conspicuous

consumption (Freeland, 2012; Veblen, 1899/1985). These impressions of the upwardly mobile could be based on actual patterns of ostentatious behaviors that are related to underlying feelings of entitlement.

Upwardly mobile individuals may feel strongly entitled because they develop highly favorable views of their own abilities and effort by virtue of their improved SES. Upwardly mobile individuals may be acutely aware of the external circumstances that could have hindered their success (Freeland, 2012). As a result, they may feel particularly responsible for their successes, perceiving that they have achieved through their own actions, rather than through resources and opportunities granted by their family background. The upwardly mobile may thus interpret their currently high standing in society as evidence of uniquely high talent and drive. This perception could be, in part, based on others’ perceptions of them, because upwardly mobile individuals are often admired. In the United States, for example, the upwardly mobile epitomize the American Dream, the promise that people who work hard can achieve a better life (Chetty et al., 2017). Upwardly mobile individuals may interpret others’ admiration as further evidence of their unique talent and drive. Widely held meritocratic beliefs prescribe that superior talent and drive should be compensated at higher levels (Major et al., 2007). Upwardly mobile individuals may apply meritocratic beliefs to their own situation and conclude that they should receive more privileges and rewards than others because they exhibit high capabilities and effort. By contrast, stationary high SES individuals may have less evidence that they possess superior traits because they have not had to overcome the same obstacles, and are less likely to participate in the labor force (Elinder et al., 2012). In addition, the currently low standing of downwardly mobile and stationary low SES individuals may undermine self-perceptions as uniquely talented and motivated, preventing feelings of entitlement.

The mobility model thus posits that upwardly mobile individuals feel especially entitled because the self-serving attributions that they make about their improved status are direct consequences of upward mobility. This should be reflected in an interaction between current and childhood SES, so that the positive association between current SES and entitlement is more pronounced among individuals with lower childhood SES than among individuals with higher childhood SES. Moreover, childhood SES should be negatively associated with entitlement among currently higher SES individuals, but not currently lower SES individuals.<sup>2</sup> This interaction can be seen in Panel B of Figure 1, where those with a combination of high current and low childhood SES feel more entitled than everyone else.

### **Main Effects Models of SES and Entitlement**

It is also possible that current and childhood SES do not interact, and that one or both of them shapes entitlement independently of the other.

### *The Childhood SES Only Model*

Life course socialization research suggests that some attitudes are acquired during specific periods of development and are largely resistant to future influences during later periods when attitudes are less likely to imprint (Elder, 1974; Jablin, 2001). Individuals may feel entitled to the extent that they were raised and socialized by higher income and highly educated parents who devoted considerable resources to their upbringing (Schneider et al., 2018). Children raised by higher SES parents may grow up thinking they are special because they receive considerable resources during their childhood, and maintain this belief throughout their lives regardless of their future circumstances because they acquired this belief during a critical and formative period of development. Thus, childhood SES might uniquely determine entitlement. In Panel C of Figure 1, people with higher childhood SES have higher levels of entitlement than their counterparts with lower childhood SES, whereas people with higher current SES feel the same levels of entitlement as people with lower current SES. Notably, according to the childhood SES model, a correlation between current SES and entitlement emerges spuriously, because current and childhood SES are correlated (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). When both current and childhood SES are entered in a regression model predicting entitlement, only childhood SES should be associated with entitlement.

### *The Current SES Only Model*

Some models of attitude formation suggest that salient information is highly potent in shaping people's beliefs (Salancik & Conway, 1975). Late socialization experiences might instill new beliefs that supplant beliefs that are acquired earlier in life (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Individuals may take into account their present-day level of success to determine whether they should be entitled to more resources and special privileges than others. Current circumstances might be highly salient, whereas past conditions might be largely irrelevant in determining how deserving one feels. Thus, one's current SES might be the driving force that shapes entitlement. In Panel D of Figure 1, individuals with higher current SES have higher levels of entitlement than those with lower current SES, whereas individuals with higher childhood SES are comparable with those with lower childhood SES. According to the current SES-only model, a correlation between childhood SES and entitlement emerges spuriously because current and childhood SES are correlated (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). When both current and childhood SES are entered in a model, only current SES is associated with entitlement.

### *The Additive Model*

Individuals may feel more entitled to the extent that their present-day income and education provide them with resources that make them feel they deserve special privileges.

In addition—and independently—individuals may feel entitled if they were raised and socialized by parents who had high incomes and education. Current and childhood SES might have separate, linear relationships with entitlement. In Panel E of Figure 1, individuals with higher current SES are more entitled than those with lower current SES, and also, individuals with higher childhood SES are more entitled than those with lower childhood SES. The additive model predicts that when current and childhood SES are entered in a model, they are both positively associated with entitlement. Furthermore, in this approach, the interaction term between current and childhood SES is not significant, because an interaction would reveal that current and childhood SES operate jointly rather than independently.

The additive model is conceptually equivalent to an “average” SES model, whereby entitlement is predicted from the average of current and childhood SES, because the average is calculated by adding childhood SES and current SES and then dividing the sum by a constant (i.e., 2). Indeed, in Panel E of Figure 1, individuals who are high on current or childhood SES and low on the other are less entitled than those who are high on both, and more entitled than those who are low on both.

## **The Present Research**

We first examined the relationships between current SES, childhood SES, and entitlement in an exploratory fashion, because the sustained privileged model and the competing models are all supported by logical arguments, and no previous research has directly pitted these models against each other. We meta-analyzed the results from four samples of participants who had completed measures of current SES, childhood SES, and entitlement. After finding support for the sustained privileged model in this initial phase, we tested it in a preregistered confirmatory study.

### **Study 1: Exploratory Meta-Analysis**

We first explored the competing models of how current and childhood SES relate to entitlement by integrating the results of four samples of U.S. residents that included the relevant measures (total  $N = 3,105$ ) using meta-analysis (Borenstein et al., 2009). We cumulated the results using meta-analysis because tests of nonlinear associations such as interactions require high statistical power (Aguinis, 1995; Frazier et al., 2004). Evaluating and cumulating the results of individual studies using hypothesis testing are limited when some of these studies have relatively small samples (Borenstein et al., 2009; Schmidt & Hunter, 2014). Another benefit of meta-analysis is that it limits the biasing effects of sampling error in estimations of cumulative associations (Borenstein et al., 2009; Schmidt & Hunter, 2014).

The questionnaires, data, and R code for each of the primary studies and for the meta-analysis are publicly available (see the “Open Practices” section below).

## Method

**Participants.** Participants were U.S. residents recruited from Clearvoice (Samples 1 and 2) or Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Samples 3 and 4). Participants were included in the analyses if they completed the measure of psychological entitlement, plus measures of at least one combination of current and childhood SES indices (i.e., both current and parental income, both current and parental education, or both subjective current and childhood SES). Sizes and descriptive statistics for the demographic characteristics in each sample are presented in the first four columns in Supplemental Table S1. Sample sizes differ across data sets because some of the data were initially collected to test different hypotheses, and testing these different hypotheses required varying amounts of statistical power. To increase representativeness, we recruited Sample 2 using quotas for gender and ethnicity using statistics from the American Community Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau.

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants completed surveys that included measures of current and parental income and education, current and childhood subjective SES, psychological entitlement, and demographic characteristics. Other variables measured for separate investigations appear in the questionnaires that are posted online.

## Measures

**Current SES.** Participants reported their personal income during the previous year. Participants in Sample 1 chose among 16 options ranging from US\$0 (no income) to US\$250,000 or more. Participants in Samples 2 and 3 chose among 15 options ranging from US\$0 to US\$9,999 to US\$250,000 or more. Participants in Sample 4 chose among 22 options ranging from US\$0 (no income) to US\$500,000 or more. To assign a value for the highest category, we adopted a strategy frequently used in sociological research (Hout, 2004; Parker & Fenwick, 1983). This strategy uses the number of participants and the lower bounds of the second highest and highest income brackets to identify the most likely average income of participants in the highest bracket. The formulas appear in Hout (2004).

Participants indicated their highest diploma or degree attained by choosing among several options. Participants in Sample 1 chose among “less than high school” (coded as 1), “high school or some university” (coded as 2), “Bachelor’s degree” (coded as 3), “Master’s degree” (coded as 4), or “PhD or professional degree” (coded as 5). Participants in Samples 2, 3, and 4 chose among “less than high school” (coded as 1), “high school diploma or GED” (coded as 2), “associate or vocational degree” (coded as 3), “Bachelor’s degree” (coded as 4), “Master’s degree” (coded as 5), “Professional degree” (coded as 6), “PhD Degree” (also coded as 6), or “Other.” For the 18, 13, and four participants who chose “Other” in Studies 2, 3, and 4, respectively, we

assigned a value corresponding to the most similar category (value assignments appear in the code for analysis that is posted online).

We administered two measures of subjective current SES. In the first measure (administered in Samples 1, 3, and 4), participants indicated their agreement with three statements on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “I have enough money to buy things I want,” “I don’t need to worry too much about paying my bills,” and “I don’t think I’ll have to worry about money too much in the future” (Griskevicius et al., 2011). Internal reliability was high ( $\alpha = .86-.89$ ). In the second measure (administered to all four samples), participants indicated which of the following social class categories they currently belonged to: lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, or upper class. The two measures were correlated in the three studies in which they were both administered (meta-analytic  $r = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ , confidence interval [CI] = [0.42, 0.57]). Thus, we standardized scores on the two measures, and then averaged the standardized scores. For Sample 2, we standardized the scores on the only measure that was administered.

**Childhood SES.** Participants reported their parents’ annual income when they were growing up (between ages 0 and 18), using the same response options as for personal income. We used the same procedure to assign a value for the highest category.

Participants reported the education levels of each of their parents or guardians separately, using the same options as for their own education. The correlation between the education of fathers and mothers was high (meta-analytic  $r = .57$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI = [0.52, 0.62]). We thus aggregated the scores to create one score for parents’ education.

We used the same scales adapted to represent childhood subjective SES. Participants in Samples 1, 3, and 4 completed a scale consisting of three statements rated on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “My family usually had enough money for things when I was growing up,” “I grew up in a relatively wealthy neighborhood,” and “I felt relatively wealthy compared to the other kids in my school” (Griskevicius et al., 2011). Internal reliability was high ( $\alpha = .78-.87$ ). Participants in all four samples indicated which of the following social classes they belonged to for the longer time when they were growing up (between ages 0 and 18): lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, or upper class. The two scales were highly correlated in the three studies in which they were both administered (meta-analytic  $r = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI = [0.66, 0.77]). They were standardized and then averaged. For Sample 2, we standardized the scores on the only measure of subjective childhood SES that was administered.

**Entitlement.** We administered the Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004) in each study. Respondents indicated their agreement with nine items (e.g., “I

**Table 1.** Summary of Conditions to Infer Support for Each Model.

Model	Current SES	Childhood SES	Interaction	Simple slopes for the association between current SES and entitlement		Simple slopes for the association between childhood SES and entitlement	
				Among high childhood SES participants	Among low childhood SES participants	Among high current SES participants	Among low current SES participants
Sustained privilege model			Significantly positive	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant
Mobility model			Significantly negative	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Significantly negative	Nonsignificant
Childhood-only model	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant	Nonsignificant	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Significantly positive
Current-only model	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant	Nonsignificant
Additive model	Significantly positive	Significantly positive	Nonsignificant	Significantly positive	Significantly positive	Significantly positive	Significantly positive

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others") on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale (see the supplemental material for the full list of items). This measure converges with other measures of entitlement, and shows small correlations with measures of distinct constructs such as other personality traits (Campbell et al., 2004). In addition, this scale shows predictive validity with various self-serving behaviors (Campbell et al., 2004; Zitek et al., 2010). The scale was reliable in past research (Campbell et al., 2004) and in our studies ( $\alpha = .90-.91$ ).

### Analytical Strategy

We first standardized the scores for current SES, childhood SES, and entitlement in each of the primary samples. We created interaction terms between current and childhood SES using the standardized SES variables. We regressed entitlement on current SES, childhood SES, and their interaction, in each sample. The results of these regression analyses appear in the first four sets of columns of Supplemental Table S2.

We then employed bare-bones meta-analytic procedures (Schmidt & Hunter, 2014) to aggregate the unstandardized coefficients for the interaction term between current and childhood SES (Rosenthal & DiMatteo, 2001). We formally probed any interactions by meta-analyzing the simple slopes for the association between current SES and entitlement at higher (one standard deviation above the mean) and lower (one standard deviation below the mean) levels of childhood SES (Aiken & West, 1991). We also meta-analyzed the results of "spotlight" analyses for the association between childhood SES and entitlement among higher (one standard deviation above the mean) and lower (one standard deviation below the mean) current SES participants (Irwin &

McClelland, 2001). The conditions to infer support for each model are listed in Table 1.

### Results

**Descriptive statistics.** Descriptive statistics for the measures of SES and entitlement appear in the first four sets of columns in Supplemental Table S3. Notably, the mean income in Sample 1 was larger than in Studies 2 to 4, possibly because the instructions in Sample 1 did not explicitly request that respondents report their personal income, and thus, some respondents may have reported their household income. Even so, the findings in Sample 1 reported below were consistent with the findings of the other samples.

**Correlations.** Meta-analytic correlations among the variables and 95% CIs for the correlations appear in Supplemental Table S4. The correlations between current and childhood SES were significantly positive and moderate in size, signifying not only intergenerational consistency in SES but also changes in the rank ordering of individuals over time.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we observed some mobility in these samples.

Both current and parental income, and both current and childhood subjective SES, were significantly positively correlated with entitlement. These results are consistent with the past findings that income and subjective SES relate positively to entitlement that we summarized above. The correlation between education and entitlement was not examined in past research. Our findings suggest that parental education has a small positive association with entitlement, but education was not significantly associated with entitlement. This suggests that being more highly educated may contribute to entitlement to a lesser extent than having a higher income or feeling that one's SES is higher. Notably, all the relationships

**Table 2.** Meta-Analytic Regression Results and Simple Slopes at High and Low Levels of Current and Childhood SES Predicting Entitlement—Exploratory Stage.

Facet of SES	Current SES	Childhood SES	Interaction	Simple slopes for the association between current SES and entitlement		Simple slopes for the association between childhood SES and entitlement	
				Among high childhood SES participants	Among low childhood SES participants	Among high current SES participants	Among low current SES participants
Income	.07 [0.03, 0.10]	.03 [-0.005, 0.07]	.04 [0.01, 0.08]	.11 [0.07, 0.15]	.04 [-0.002, 0.08]	.09 [0.04, 0.13]	.01 [-0.04, 0.05]
Education	.01 [-0.03, 0.05]	.02 [-0.01, 0.06]	.07 [0.03, 0.10]	.08 [0.03, 0.13]	-.05 [-0.11, 0.003]	.06 [0.02, 0.11]	-.04 [-0.10, 0.01]
Subjective SES	.07 [0.03, 0.10]	.07 [0.03, 0.11]	.08 [0.05, 0.12]	.15 [0.10, 0.19]	-.02 [-0.07, 0.03]	.15 [0.11, 0.19]	-.02 [-0.07, 0.02]

Note. Parameters are sample-size weighted mean unstandardized regression coefficient for the interaction between current and childhood SES or the simple slope. Values in brackets are 95% confidence interval for the meta-analytic unstandardized regression coefficients. Simple slopes were calculated at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator variable. SES = socioeconomic status.

between SES and entitlement were small, as the meta-analytic correlation coefficients were all lower than .10.

#### Tests of current and childhood SES and entitlement

**Income.** Meta-analytic coefficients and 95% CIs for parental income, personal income, and the interaction term appear in Table 2. For income, the meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction was .04, with a CI that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction for the combined sample and the individual studies (see Figure 2) supports the sustained privilege hypothesis that higher income individuals with higher income parents feel the most entitled. Meta-analytic simple slopes that formally describe the interaction at values of one standard deviation above and below the mean of parental income also appear in Table 2. Income was positively associated with entitlement among participants with higher parental income, but not among participants with lower parental income. Furthermore, higher income participants felt more entitled if their parents had higher income, compared with lower income. By contrast, lower income individuals reported low levels of entitlement, regardless of how much their parents earned. Thus, all the criteria to infer support for the sustained privilege hypothesis were met. Results reported in Supplemental Table S5 indicate that the relationships were virtually the same when controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age, revealing that the results were not spuriously caused by these demographic factors.

**Education.** The meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction between education and parental education was .07, with a CI that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction displayed in Figure 3 supports the sustained privilege hypothesis that highly educated individuals with highly educated parents feel the most entitled. Simple slopes reported in Table 2 confirm that education was positively associated with entitlement among participants with higher parental education,

but there was no such association among participants with lower parental education. Furthermore, highly educated participants felt more entitled if their parents were also highly educated than if their parents had low education. Individuals with lower education reported low levels of entitlement, regardless of their parents' levels of education. All the criteria to infer support for the sustained privileged hypothesis were met.

**Subjective SES.** The meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction between current and childhood subjective SES was .08, with a CI that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction shown in Figure 4 is again consistent with the sustained privilege hypothesis that the most entitled individuals feel that they had high ranking in society during their childhood and also have high ranking currently. Simple slopes shown in Table 2 reveal that current SES was positively associated with entitlement among those with high subjective childhood SES, but not among those with low subjective childhood SES. Furthermore, participants with high subjective current SES felt more significantly entitled if they felt they grew up upper class than if they felt they grew up lower class. Lower subjective SES participants reported low levels of entitlement regardless of their childhood SES. All the criteria to infer support for the sustained privileged hypothesis were met.

## Study 2: Confirmatory Test of the Sustained Privilege Model

In the exploratory stage of our investigation, we found support for the sustained privilege model, which posits that stationary high SES individuals feel more entitled than everyone else. These results are tentative, however, because we adopted an exploratory approach in which we considered several candidate models of current and childhood SES and

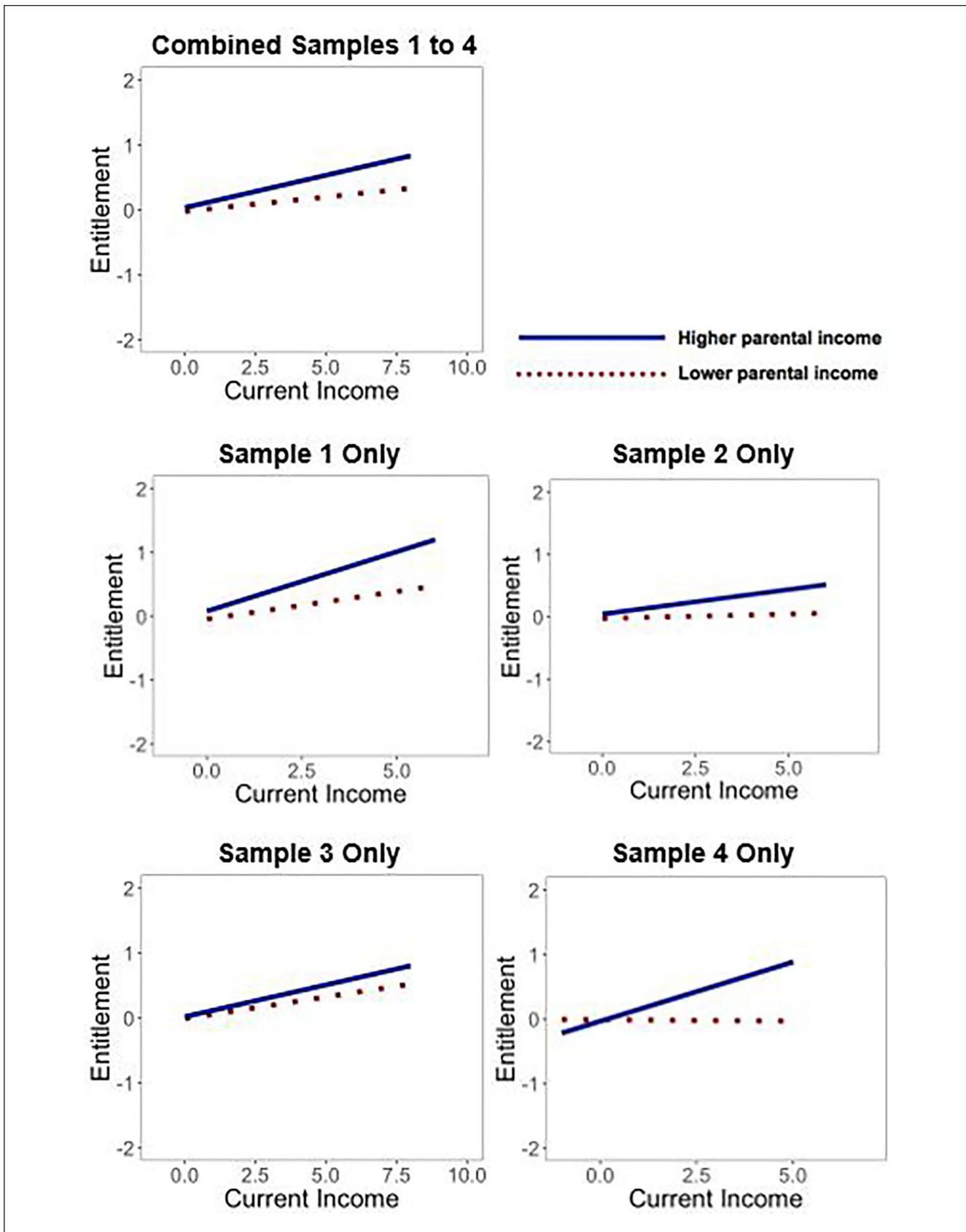
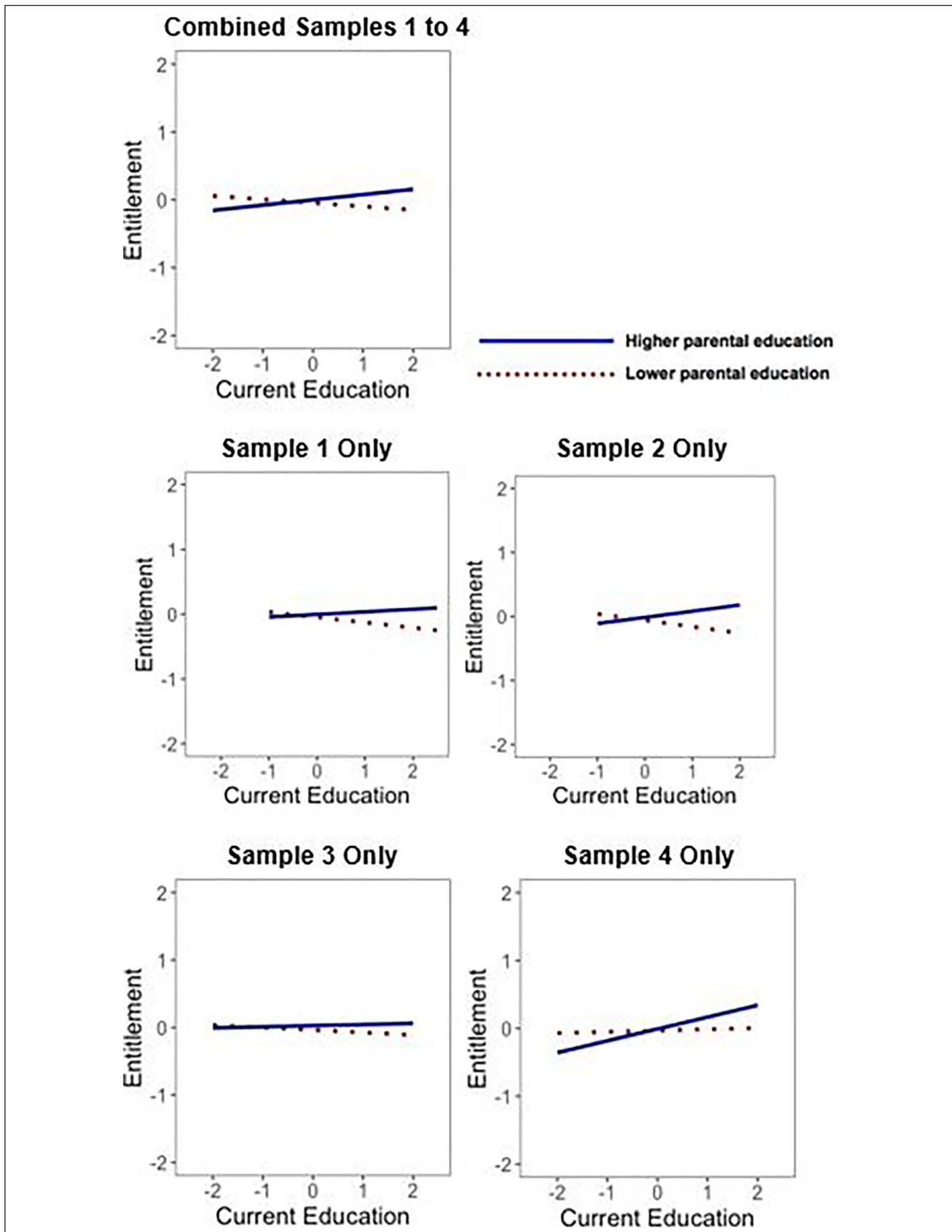
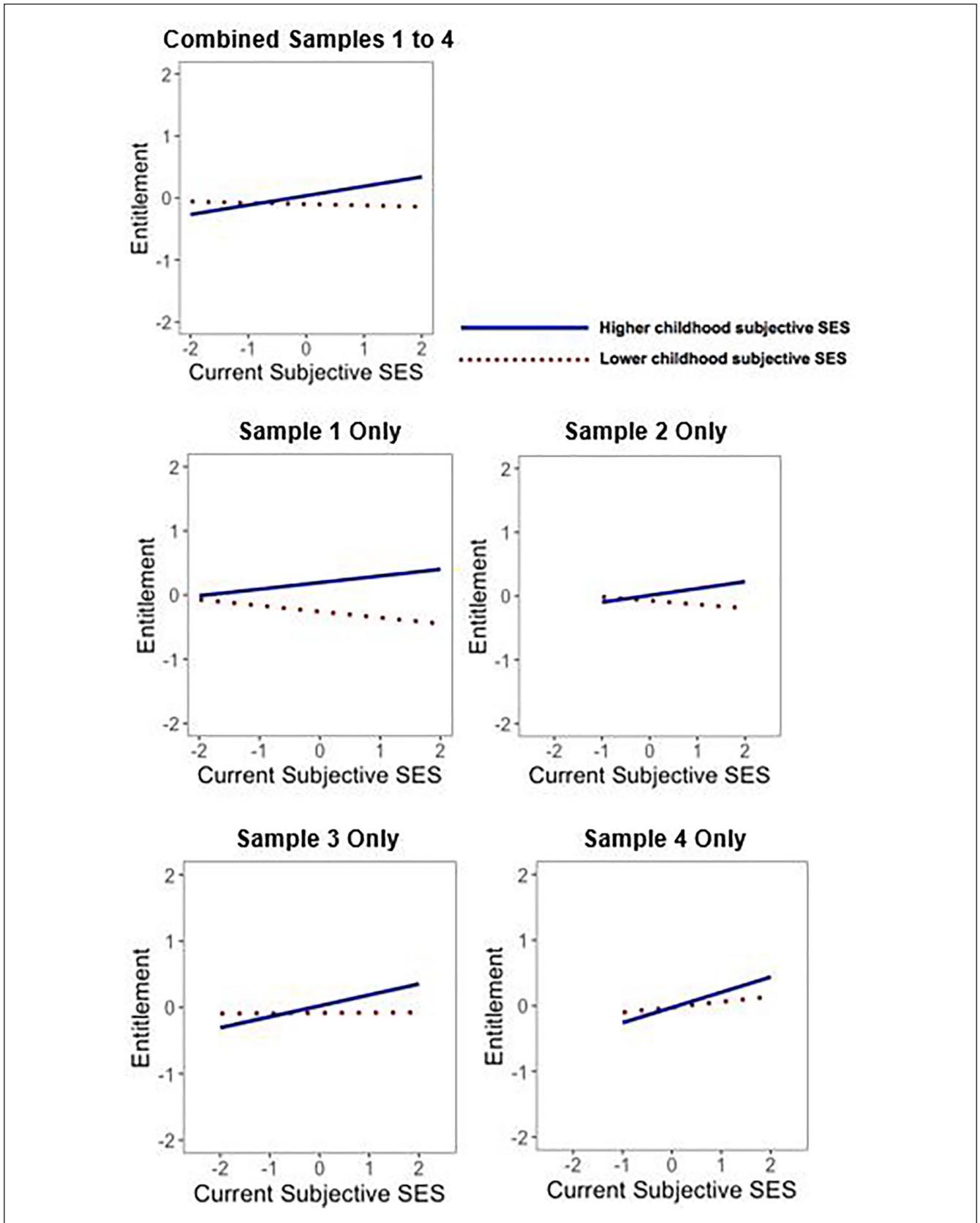


Figure 2. Interaction between current income and parental income predicting entitlement.



**Figure 3.** Interaction between current education and parental education predicting entitlement.



**Figure 4.** Interaction between current subjective SES and childhood subjective SES predicting entitlement.  
 Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

entitlement. Therefore, in the next step, we tested the sustained privilege hypothesis in a preregistered, confirmatory study.

The preregistration document, questionnaire, data, and R code for analysis are publicly available (see the “Open Practices” section below). The methods and analyses correspond to our preregistration except for two deviations that we describe below.

## Method

**Participants.** We recruited 1,058 U.S. residents from Prolific (<https://prolific.ac/>). Participants were included in the analyses if they completed the measure of psychological entitlement, plus measures of at least one combination of current and childhood SES indices. Samples sizes and demographic characteristics for the demographic characteristics are presented in the last column of Supplemental Table S1.

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants completed surveys that included measures of current and parental income and education, current and childhood subjective SES, psychological entitlement, and demographic characteristics. As can be seen in the questionnaire that is posted online, we also measured other variables for exploratory purposes and separate investigations (e.g., opposition to redistributive social policies, tolerance of economic inequality).

## Measures

**Current SES.** Participants reported their personal income during the previous year by choosing among 31 options ranging from US\$0 (no income) to US\$1,000,000 or more. We needed to deviate from the preregistration because the formula developed by Hout (2004) that we preregistered involves a division by the number of participants who selected the second largest income category, but no participant chose that category in this sample. The formula does not produce a value because, in this case, it involves a division by 0. Instead of using Hout’s formula, we used another strategy used in past research (e.g., Côté et al., 2015). We assigned the lower bound (US\$1,000,000) to the five participants who selected the highest category.

Participants indicated their highest diploma or degree attained by choosing among “less than high school” (coded as 1), “high school diploma or GED” (coded as 2), “associate or vocational degree” (coded as 3), “Bachelor’s degree” (coded as 4), “Master’s degree” (coded as 5), or “PhD Degree” (also coded as 6). Participants could also choose “Professional degree” or “Other” and specify the details. In these cases, we assigned a value corresponding to the most similar category (value assignments can be seen in the code for analysis that is posted online).

We used two measures to assess subjective current SES. First, we administered the standard version of the McArthur

scale of SES concerning their current situation (Adler et al., 2000). Scores range from 1 (*bottom run of the ladder*, or lowest SES) to 10 (*top rung of the ladder*, or highest SES). Second, participants completed the three-item scale that we administered in three of the exploratory studies ( $\alpha = .86$ ; Griskevicius et al., 2011). The two measures were correlated ( $r = .58, p < .001$ ). By mistake, we only mentioned the McArthur scale in the preregistration even though we included both measures in the questionnaire. Thus, we deviated from the preregistration—yet stayed consistent with our measurement strategy in the exploratory stage—by standardizing and aggregating the scores on the two measures to create a composite score for current subjective SES.

**Childhood SES.** Participants reported their mothers’ and fathers’ annual incomes when they were growing up (between ages 0 and 18), using the same response options as for personal income. We used the same procedure to assign a value for the highest category. We summed the responses for mothers and fathers.

Participants reported the education levels of each of their parents or guardians separately, using the same options as for their own education. The correlation between the education of fathers and mothers was high ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ). We aggregated the scores to create one score for parents’ education.

To assess childhood subjective SES, participants completed the standard version of the McArthur scale of SES concerning their situation during their childhood (Adler et al., 2000). Scores range from 1 (*bottom run of the ladder*, or lowest SES) to 10 (*top rung of the ladder*, or highest SES). In addition, participants completed the same three-item scale that we administered in three of the exploratory studies ( $\alpha = .83$ ; Griskevicius et al., 2011). The two scales were highly correlated ( $r = .70, p < .001$ ). Again, by mistake, we only included the McArthur scale in the preregistration. We deviated from the preregistration by standardizing and then aggregating the scores on the two measures to create a composite score for childhood subjective SES.

**Psychological entitlement.** We again administered the Psychological Entitlement Scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ; Campbell et al., 2004).

## Analytical Strategy

We tested the sustained privilege hypothesis using regression analysis. As in the exploratory stage, we used the conditions in Table 1 to infer support for this hypothesis.

## Results

**Descriptive statistics.** Descriptive statistics for the measures of SES and entitlement appear in Supplemental Table S6.

**Table 3.** Regression Results—Confirmatory Stage.

Predictor	B	SE	t
Intercept	3.13	0.04	83.08***
Current income	0.03	0.01	5.56***
Parental income	0.001	0.004	0.30
Current × Parental income	-0.00002	0.0001	-0.30
Intercept	3.08	0.04	78.13***
Current education	0.14	0.04	4.08***
Parental education	0.02	0.03	0.81
Current × Parental education	0.10	0.02	4.11***
Intercept	3.07	0.04	75.26***
Current subjective SES	0.08	0.05	1.72
Childhood subjective SES	0.11	0.05	2.51*
Current × Childhood subjective SES	0.15	0.04	3.69***

Note. Income and education are not standardized. Subjective SES is the average of two standardized items. B = unstandardized parameter estimate;

SE = standard error; SES = socioeconomic status

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Correlations.** Correlations among the variables appear in Supplemental Table S7. The correlations between current and childhood SES were again significantly positive and moderate in size, signifying both some intergenerational consistency in SES and some mobility.

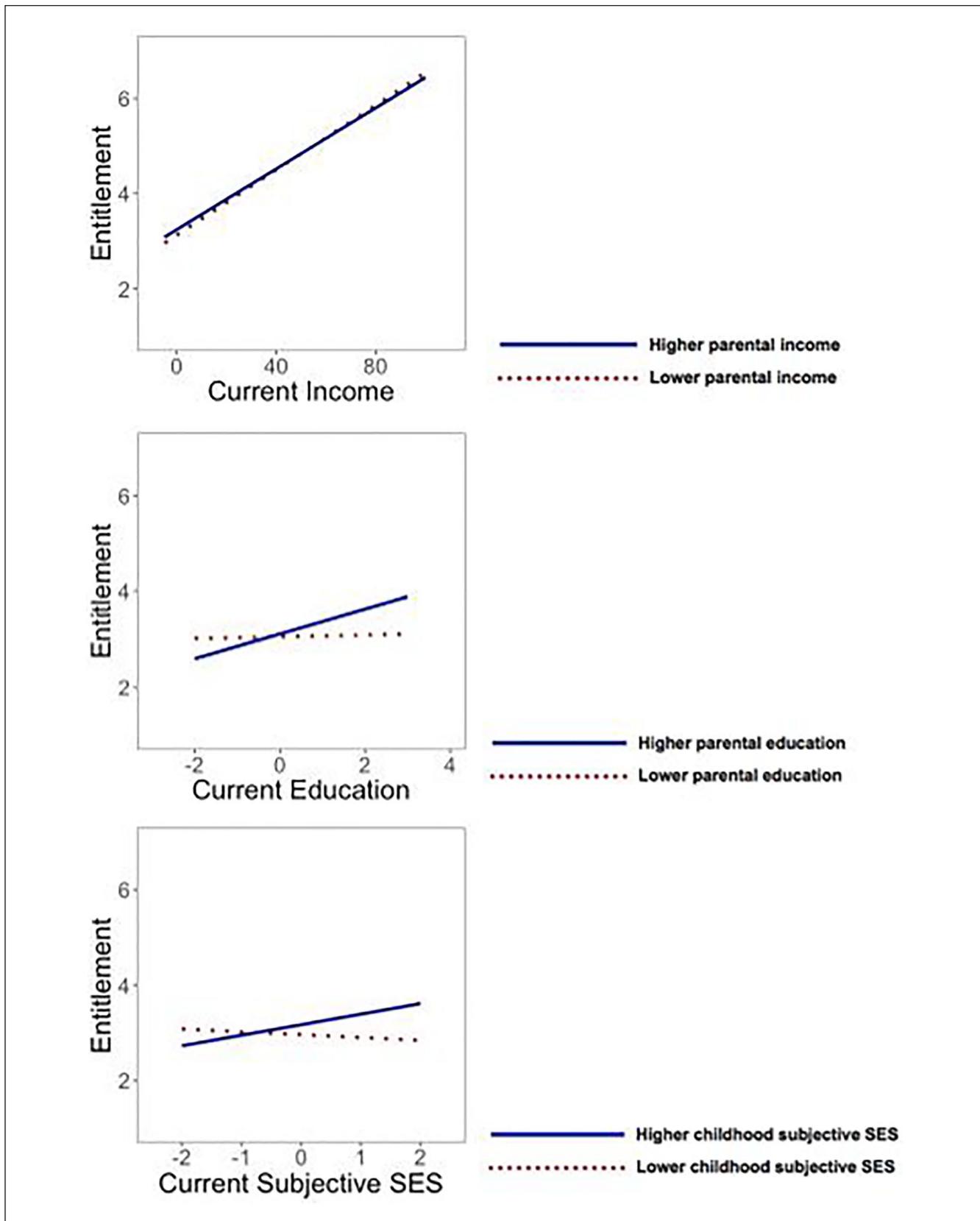
All the correlations between SES and entitlement were positive and stronger in this study than in the meta-analysis from the exploratory phase. The largest correlation ( $r = .23$  with income) was more than twice as large as the largest correlation from the exploratory phase ( $r = .09$  with both income and current subjective SES). Moreover, in three instances (i.e., with current and parental income and with current education), the correlation exceeded the upper bound of the CI identified in the exploratory phase. One possible explanation for these differences is the higher attentiveness of participants recruited from Prolific, which has been documented in past research (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017).

**Test of sustained privilege hypothesis.** The results of the regression analyses appear in Table 3. To probe significant interactions, we tested simple slopes for the association between current SES and entitlement at higher (one standard deviation above the mean) and lower (one standard deviation below the mean) levels of childhood SES. In addition, we examined the association between childhood SES and entitlement at higher (one standard deviation above the mean) and lower (one standard deviation below the mean) levels of current SES.

**Income.** The coefficient for the interaction between current income and parental income was not significant. Thus, the sustained privileged hypothesis was not supported for income. The coefficient for current income was significantly positive and the coefficient for parental income was not, consistent with the current SES-only model. This can be seen visually in the top panel of Figure 5.

**Education.** The coefficient for the interaction between participant and parental education was significant. Tests of simple slopes revealed that the association between education and entitlement was positive among participants with highly educated parents,  $B = 0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 6.00$ ,  $p < .001$ , but there was no association among participants whose parents were less educated,  $B = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 0.29$ ,  $p = .77$ . Furthermore, among highly educated participants, those with more highly educated parents felt more entitled than those whose parents were less educated,  $B = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = 3.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . Among participants with less education, those with more highly educated parents felt less entitled than those whose parents were less educated,  $B = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = -2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . Results reported in Supplemental Table S8 indicate that the interaction resisted controls for gender, ethnicity, and age. Thus, the criteria to infer support for the sustained privilege hypothesis were met for education. The interaction can be seen in the middle panel of Figure 5.

**Subjective SES.** The coefficient for the interaction between current and childhood subjective SES was significant. The association between current subjective SES and entitlement was positive among participants with high childhood subjective SES,  $B = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 3.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , but there was no association among participants with low childhood subjective SES,  $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -0.96$ ,  $p = .34$ . Furthermore, among individuals with higher current subjective SES, those with higher childhood subjective SES felt more entitled than those with lower childhood subjective SES,  $B = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , but among individuals with lower current subjective SES, there was no such association,  $B = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -0.38$ ,  $p = .70$ . The interaction was robust to inclusion of controls for gender, ethnicity, and age (see Supplemental Table S8). Thus, the criteria to infer support for the sustained privilege hypothesis were met for subjective SES.



**Figure 5.** Interaction between current SES and childhood SES predicting entitlement in the confirmatory study.  
 Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

hypothesis were met for subjective SES. The interaction can be seen in the bottom panel of Figure 5.

When we repeated this analysis with only the McArthur scale of subjective SES, the interaction and the simple slopes were significant and as predicted by the sustained privilege hypothesis. The only difference was that the spotlight analysis of childhood subjective SES and entitlement among higher current subjective SES individuals was not significant (but it remained in the expected direction).

### Exploratory analyses

*Exploratory analyses of income.* To inform future research, we examined the responses to questions about income and made two relevant observations. First, there were outliers that were 3.29 standard deviations above the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), which we did not expect because there were often none in our past studies. Second, there were observations where personal income exceeded household income, which were anomalous because we explicitly defined household income as income received by participants (i.e., personal income) plus all other people living in their household. When we repeated the analysis after removing the outliers and anomalous observations, the interaction term was significant,  $B = 0.002$ ,  $SE = 0.001$ ,  $t = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the shape of the interaction was consistent with the sustained privilege hypothesis. Although this result is exploratory and tentative, it indicates that judgment calls for treating outliers and anomalous observations have important consequences for the results of analyses with income.

*Exploratory analyses of country of birth.* All participants currently resided in the United States, but a subset of 42 participants reported being born outside of the United States. It is difficult to compare their childhood SES—and especially their parental income—with the childhood SES of participants born in the United States, because of differences in average income across countries. Participants from countries with relatively low median income may resemble upwardly mobile participants because their objective income increased, even though their relative economic standing in their home country might have been high. To verify that the results were not affected by these possibilities, we reanalyzed the data with only the 1,016 participants who reported being born in the United States. The results were the same. There was no interaction for income,  $B = -0.0001$ ,  $SE = 0.0001$ ,  $t = -0.78$ ,  $p = .44$ , and the interactions for education,  $B = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t = 4.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , and subjective SES,  $B = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t = 3.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , were significant.

## General Discussion

In this research, we examined whether feelings of entitlement are especially high among individuals with high current and childhood SES. A meta-analysis of four exploratory studies

supported the sustained privilege hypothesis that the greatest levels of entitlement are felt by those who have previously occupied and continue to occupy privileged societal positions. The same levels of entitlement were not felt by the upwardly or downwardly mobile, or by those who have never known privilege. This pattern was replicated for two indicators of SES, education and subjective SES, but not for income, in a preregistered, confirmatory study.

Our analyses of the difference between stationary high SES and upwardly mobile individuals advance past research by suggesting that only some higher SES individuals are prone to feeling entitled. The findings challenge the assumption—implicit in past research—that higher SES individuals feel similar levels of entitlement irrespective of their SES background. Instead, how current SES shapes attitudes and behaviors seems to depend on one's life history, and particularly whether one has maintained a privileged status, rather than transitioned across the class spectrum throughout their lives.

The results for education and subjective SES were consistent across the exploratory and confirmatory stages of the research. The evidence for income, however, is inconclusive. The results of the exploratory stage suggested that income might operate like education and subjective SES. The results of the confirmatory stage suggested that current income might be the driving force shaping entitlement. Subsidiary analyses revealed that the interaction might have been less robust because of the difficulties of analyzing income data. The data included outliers and anomalous observations in which participants reported a higher personal income than household income. In exploratory analyses in which we removed outliers and anomalous responses, the results for income again supported the sustained privilege hypothesis. The meta-analytic results might have been more robust to outliers and anomalous responses because they aggregated the responses of approximately 3 times more participants than the confirmatory study. In future research, participants could be asked to correct their responses, and an a priori decision could be made to remove anomalous observations from the analyses.

The findings illuminate the psychological manifestations of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. Individuals with a combination of high current and childhood SES exhibited uniquely strong feelings of entitlement. Thus, one potential consequence of limited social mobility is that many of society's highest ranking members believe they are particularly deserving of resources and privileges. These findings may also speak to the psychological experience of upward mobility. We described that the unique success of upwardly mobile individuals may lead them to form favorable self-views that could, in turn, cause feelings of entitlement. Our findings are instead more consistent with the possibility that the upwardly mobile feel gratitude for assistance they received while climbing up the hierarchy. Thus, societies featuring frequent

mobility, high-standing members might not necessarily feel more entitled to resources and privileges than the rest of the population.

Our research highlights the critical importance of considering current and childhood SES jointly to accurately understand its association with entitlement, and possibly other attitudes and behaviors. Because social mobility is limited and current and childhood SES are correlated, any correlation between childhood or current SES and a criterion could be spuriously caused by the other, and this cannot be ascertained unless both are measured and included in a regression model. Furthermore, the results suggest that current and childhood SES shape beliefs and behaviors in ways that can only be detected by examining their interaction. The results offer an important caveat to the current literature comparing higher and lower SES individuals and an important paradigm to employ in future research on SES. An interactive approach allows researchers to examine novel questions about SES that are important in an increasingly unequal society.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Our investigation has several limitations. Our methodology relied on participants' reports of their parents' income and education, inviting questions about the accuracy of these reports and the impact of reporting error and biases on our conclusions. Most people are likely aware of their parents' education, which is objective information that is often discussed between family members. However, some participants might not have remembered or ever known their parents' income, and might have guessed based on clues such as the size of their house and the neighborhood in which they lived. The results of the meta-analysis were comparable for income and education, suggesting that reports of parental income were reasonably accurate, because excessively noisy measurement would have made it impossible to detect an interaction. At the same time, the limitations of asking participants to report parental income might explain why income was the only facet of SES that did not replicate in the confirmatory study. To address this limitation, in future studies, parents could be asked to report their income. In addition, our conclusions are based on a single measure of entitlement. Although we used the most extensively validated measure of entitlement (Campbell et al., 2004), it is important to examine whether the patterns hold with other measures.

Our study designs do not allow us to rule out some alternative causal explanations of the results. One possibility is that a combination of high childhood SES and entitlement might cause a high SES in adulthood. Some but not all individuals from high SES backgrounds might come to feel entitled, and those who feel entitled might pursue future high SES more persistently, whereas those who do not feel entitled might lose their social standing. This possibility is consistent with findings that entitlement increases status-seeking

behavior (Lange et al., 2019). Another possibility is that entitled individuals uniformly report positive things about themselves—and thus reported inflated levels of both current and childhood SES. This concern is alleviated to some extent by the results about education, because education is a relatively objective characteristic that is difficult to distort. Even so, the support for the sustained privilege model was stronger and more consistent with subjective SES—the facet of SES that is likely most affected by self-serving biases—than with the objective indicators of SES, lending credence to this alternative explanation. The possibility that entitled individuals report inflated levels of any positive characteristic, including their current and childhood SES, should be examined in future research. Longitudinal data could be obtained to examine how changes in SES correspond to changes in entitlement over time.

We assessed SES at two time points: currently and during childhood. Some participants we considered to have stationary high SES might have experienced lower SES between these time points. Data showing that social mobility is limited suggest that participants who reported high childhood and high current SES are more likely to have experienced high SES between these time points rather than a drop in their SES (Berman, 2019; Chetty et al., 2017). Moreover, if the standing of participants who we considered to be stationary high SES actually changed during their lifetime, they should still be more stationary than those who reported low SES during their childhood, currently, or both. Finally, to the extent that our labeling of individuals as stationary high SES has some error, this would have made our test more conservative.

All participants were U.S. residents, inviting questions about the generalizability of the results across cultures. Evidence suggests differences in associations between SES and attitudes across cultures. A recent investigation showed that high SES is associated with self-focused tendencies in the United States, but both self- and other-focused tendencies in Japan (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Future studies could test the patterns we detected in other cultures.

Another limitation of our research is that we did not examine why stationary high SES individuals might feel more entitled than everyone else.<sup>4</sup> At the outset, we described several possible reasons (e.g., feelings of cultural superiority, expectations of continuing to acquire resources relatively easily) that should be examined in future research. It would also be insightful to examine whether other people who achieve a high SES standing with relatively little effort—for example, by winning the lottery—also feel highly entitled. In addition, we focused our discussion on why stationary high SES individuals would feel uniquely entitled, but it is possible that something unique about upwardly mobile individuals actively diminishes their tendency to feel entitled. In particular, upwardly mobile individuals—who grow up with few resources—might feel particularly grateful for support

they received to overcome obstacles while climbing the SES hierarchy (McCullough et al., 2008). Gratitude, in many ways, can be construed as the opposite of entitlement because it involves an appreciation for benefits that one has received from others (Grubbs & Exline, 2016) and promotes connections to others and prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This line of reasoning suggests that upwardly mobile individuals should feel less entitled than everyone else, because they are the only people who feel grateful for assistance that helped them climb the hierarchy. Although our results do not support this alternative, as current SES was not negatively associated with entitlement among those with low childhood SES, the role of gratitude could be examined further in future research.

### Conclusion

By modeling both current and childhood SES, we detected a pattern that was not apparent in past research on SES and entitlement. Across two facets of SES (education and subjective SES), the most entitled individuals were consistently those who experienced sustained privilege—those who had a combination of high childhood and high current SES. The results mostly support the sustained privilege model of how current and childhood SES are associated with entitlement. From a structural perspective, our results generally imply that entitlement may be exacerbated by low social mobility in the population. When social mobility is low, the majority of high SES individuals also have high SES origins—a combination that our results suggest engenders feelings of entitlement. As such, our investigation highlights a previously unknown potential effect of policies that enhance social mobility in the population. Even if it is not their intended purpose, these policies may decrease the number of stationary high SES individuals, who are particularly prone to feelings of entitlement.

### Open Practices

The following documents are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/HGIHGC>

#### Exploratory stage

- Questionnaires for each of the primary studies
- Data sets for each of the primary studies
- R code for analysis for each of the primary studies
- R code for the meta-analyses

#### Confirmatory stage

- Preregistration document
- Questionnaire
- Data set
- R code for analysis

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

### Notes

1. The sustained privilege model does not make specific predictions about main effects of current and childhood socioeconomic status (SES) on entitlement.
2. The mobility model does not make specific predictions about main effects of current and childhood SES on entitlement.
3. A 95% confidence interval that excludes 0 is equivalent to a  $p$  value that is below .05 (Cohen et al., 2003).
4. In the confirmatory study, we had planned to test of one candidate mechanism (feelings of cultural superiority, which had received some support in separate exploratory analyses), and we had submitted an updated pre-registration (on [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org)) detailing this plan. We were not able to test this mechanism, however, because by mistake we only administered the measure of feelings of cultural superiority to approximately 40% of the sample. When we reduced the length of our survey by randomly assigning participants to complete 2 out of a set of 5 exploratory measures, we included this measure in that set in error. Therefore, we did not have sufficient statistical power to test this mechanism in this study. We have not yet tested this mechanism and plan to do so in future research.

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