



Beyond income: How subjective social class shapes well-being through deprivation, control, and system-justifying belief

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Abstract: This study examined how subjective social class (SSC) is associated with subjective well-being (SWB) through relative deprivation (RD) and sense of control (SoC), and how this process varies by system-justifying belief (SJB). Using a large-scale social survey (Study 1; males = 54.2%; mean age = 52.99 years) and a questionnaire-based survey (Study 2; females = 63.3%; mean age = 29.14 years), the results showed that SSC was positively associated with SWB and exerted a significant indirect effect through a sequential mediation pathway involving RD and SoC. This indirect effect was stronger among individuals with higher levels of SJB. These findings are consistent with perspectives emphasizing social comparison and cognitive adaptation, suggesting that individuals' subjective perceptions of social hierarchy shape well-being through both deprivation-related and control-related processes. The results highlight the importance of considering SSC and ideological beliefs when understanding social inequality and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Subjective social class; subjective well-being; sense of control; relative deprivation; system-justifying belief

Introduction

Positive psychology has long regarded subjective well-being (SWB) as a central research topic. SWB refers to individual's life evaluation based on personal standards. It is considered a stable yet comprehensive psychological indicator (Diener et al., 2018). Prior research has demonstrated that SWB enhances physical health and prosocial behavior (Hui, 2022), while also alleviating depressive symptoms (Cao et al., 2025). However, the World Happiness Report 2023 shows that China and several other developing countries rank only at a moderate global level in happiness (Helliwell et al., 2024), highlighting the necessity to further examine factors affecting SWB in these societies.

Among various determinants of SWB, social class has long been recognized as a key factor (Tan et al., 2020). Many studies have examined the relationship between social class and subjective well-being (SWB), yet findings regarding this relationship remain mixed. Some studies have found that individuals from lower social classes tend to report lower levels of SWB, which is also consistent with common expectations. However, other studies have reported no clear relationship between social class and SWB, and some have even suggested that individuals from higher social classes may report lower SWB (Chen et al., 2021). These inconsistent findings indicate that, to better understand this phenomenon, it is important to further examine the underlying psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions linking social class to SWB, and ultimately clarify why and under what conditions social class is related to SWB. However, previous research has not sufficiently addressed this issue (Li et al., 2024) and has instead focused primarily on the strength of the association between social class and SWB (Hong et al., 2022).

In addition, social class includes both objective social class (OSC), such as wealth and occupation, and subjective social class (SSC) (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Compared with OSC, SSC may more directly reflect individuals' perceived relative standing shaped through social comparison processes and may therefore be more closely linked to psychological experiences such as relative deprivation (RD), sense of control (SoC), and SWB. Although increasing attention has been paid to the importance of SSC in recent years, the psychological processes linking SSC to SWB remain insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, the present study examines the psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions underlying the association between SSC and SWB through a moderated mediation model.

SSC and SWB

Previous studies have found that higher social class is generally associated with greater SWB (Wang et al., 2024). However, the relationship between OSC and SWB is not always significant. Some studies have even reported weak or negative associations (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010), suggesting that economic resources alone may not be the key determinant of happiness. Instead, an individual's SSC may play a more critical role. Using data from 2017 to 2019, Chinese researchers found a positive correlation between SSC and life satisfaction (Tang & Tan, 2022). According to social comparison theory, individuals primarily evaluate their status by comparing themselves with similar others, particularly when objective evaluation standards are lacking (Ozimek et al., 2023). This social comparison process can significantly impact their SWB. In other words, relative social standing within the societal structure and its subjective perception may influence SWB more than absolute economic resources.



Relative deprivation as a mediator

In examining how SSC shapes SWB, increasing evidence identifies RD as a key mediator. RD arises when individuals perceive unequal resource or rights distribution through social comparison, which is its core mechanism (Smith et al., 2020). SSC reflects one's perceived social position relative to others and is inherently formed via social comparison (Kraus et al., 2012). Thus, individuals perceiving lower SSC are more likely to experience anger, dissatisfaction, and RD. Empirical studies confirm that people from low-income or low-SSC backgrounds report higher RD (Liu & Zhao, 2025), supporting the link between SSC and RD.

Furthermore, RD theory posits that RD not only affects individuals' emotional experiences but also exerts a range of negative effects on SWB (Smith et al., 2020). For instance, studies have found that RD is closely associated with injustice, anger, and dissatisfaction, which consequently undermine mental health and diminish life satisfaction (Schmitt et al., 2010). Based on these findings, this study proposes that compared to individuals with high SSC, those with low SSC experience stronger feelings of RD, which subsequently lowers their SWB.

Sense of control as a mediator

Beyond RD, SoC may also mediate the SSC–SWB relationship. SoC reflects individuals' beliefs about their ability to influence social outcomes (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). People from lower SSC often face limited education, disadvantaged environments, and greater unemployment risks, which restrict goal pursuit and lower SoC (Li et al., 2024). Supporting this view, a cross-national survey across 60 countries found that higher SSC is associated with stronger beliefs in personal control. Notably, differences in this fundamental personality trait across SSC are likely to have significant implications for multiple aspects of life, including mental and physical health (John et al., 2024). Prior research shows that strong SoC promotes resilience and life satisfaction, thereby increasing SWB (Greenaway et al., 2015). Similarly, Diener et al. (2018) reported that higher social class improves SWB by satisfying core psychological needs—autonomy, respect, and control. Taken together, these findings suggest that higher SSC may foster stronger SoC, which in turn enhance SWB.

The chain mediation effect

Based on the previous hypotheses, both RD and SoC mediate the relationship between SSC and SWB. However, whether these two variables play a parallel or chain mediating role is worth exploring further. Existing literature suggests that RD and SoC are not independent variables but are significantly interrelated. Specifically, those reporting elevated RD scores tend to manifest behaviors associated with a lack of control (Smith et al., 2020). Additionally, the egoistical RD model posits that SoC is a crucial mediating variable in the link between RD and well-being (Crosby, 1976). In other words, higher RD is associated with lower SoC, which is further associated with lower SWB. Building upon these findings, this study proposed that when individuals perceive themselves as being in a disadvantaged social position, they are more

likely to experience feelings of injustice, helplessness, and anger, which in turn diminish their SoC over their environment. This decreased SoC further weakens their SWB.

System-justifying belief as a potential moderator

Although RD and SoC help explain how SSC is associated with SWB, they primarily capture individual-level emotional and cognitive responses to perceived social disadvantage. However, this pathway-focused explanation does not fully account for why the association between SSC and SWB is often weaker and less stable than theoretically expected (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Yu & Blader, 2020). This inconsistency may have important theoretical implications. Further examination of this issue may help clarify the psychological mechanisms through which social class is associated with SWB.

In this context, SJB, as a broader system-level ideological belief, may serve as an important moderator. SJB refers to individuals' belief in the fairness, legitimacy, and rationality of the social system. According to system justification theory, individuals are motivated to perceive the systems in which they live as fair and legitimate. Such beliefs may satisfy psychological needs for security, certainty, and shared reality and may therefore serve a palliative role in contexts of social inequality by alleviating negative emotions and supporting SWB (Jost, 2019; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In particular, system-justifying ideologies may be particularly relevant for buffering disadvantaged groups against the adverse psychological consequences of perceived injustice (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). From a social class perspective, high-status individuals, with greater resources and higher standing, are less affected by external pressures. In contrast, individuals with lower social status are often chronically exposed to adversity, possess fewer resources, and occupy relatively disadvantaged social positions (Kraus et al., 2011). Therefore, when they perceive the social system as fair and legitimate, they may be less likely to interpret their disadvantaged circumstances as evidence of systemic unfairness, thereby buffering some of the negative psychological consequences associated with lower social status. This perspective has also received empirical support. Using nationally representative samples, Bahamondes et al. (2019) found that disadvantaged groups generally reported lower well-being than advantaged groups, but this well-being gap became smaller as SJB increased. Drawing on large-scale European data, Hadarics et al. (2021) found that belief in economic system legitimacy positively predicted life satisfaction, especially among low-income individuals. Similarly, belief in a just world—a form of SJB (Jost et al., 2014)—moderated psychological outcomes among disadvantaged groups (Laurin et al., 2011). Therefore, the present study proposes that higher levels of SJB may weaken the association between SSC and SWB.

The palliative function of SJB can be further explained by compensatory control theory, which posits that individuals are motivated to maintain an SoC, primarily to fulfil the need to perceive the external world as orderly and structured (Kay et al., 2009). However, SoC is highly sensitive to situational factors and external threats. When SoC is too low, individuals may struggle to cope with

the anxiety induced by a chaotic external world. In such cases, individuals rely on compensatory control strategies to restore a sense of order and reduce anxiety (Kay et al., 2009). At its core, compensatory control functions by reconstructing individuals' perception of order in the external world (Landau et al., 2015). SJB provide clear and structured explanations for the functioning of the social system, fulfilling individuals' need for certainty in their external environment and compensating for a lack of SoC. In other words, SJBs serve as an effective compensatory control strategy, reducing anxiety and promoting psychological well-being (Xu et al., 2024). Empirical studies have further demonstrated that belief in a just world (Jost et al., 2014)—a concrete form of SJB—enhances individuals' SoC, mitigates the psychological harm caused by negative life events, and maintains SWB (Nasser et al., 2011). Therefore, this study speculates that SJB may enhance the SWB of individuals experiencing low levels of SoC. Accordingly, SJB may moderate the association between SoC and SWB.

Taken together, SJB may function as a cognitive buffer that compensates for diminished control and helps maintain well-being under disadvantage. Building on this rationale, the study conceptualizes a moderated chain mediation model in which SJB strengthens the indirect pathway from SSC to SWB through RD and SoC.

Goals of the study

The present study employed two empirical studies to examine a moderated mediation model. Drawing on relative deprivation theory and self-determination theory, we conceptualized RD and SoC as key psychological mechanisms linking SSC to SWB. Furthermore, based on system justification theory, we examined SJB as a potential boundary condition of these associations, specifically examining whether beliefs regarding the fairness and legitimacy of the social system moderate the proposed psychological pathway. Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were proposed (see Figure 1).

H1: SSC shows a stronger positive association with SWB compared to OSC.

H2: RD mediates the relationship between SSC and SWB. Specifically, lower SSC is associated with higher RD, which in turn is associated with lower SWB.

H3: SoC mediates the relationship between SSC and SWB. Specifically, higher SSC is associated with higher SoC, which in turn is associated with higher SWB.

H4: RD and SoC play a chain mediating role in the relationship between SSC and SWB. Specifically, lower

SSC is associated with higher RD, which in turn is associated with lower SoC, and subsequently lower SWB.

H5: SJB moderates the relationship between SSC and SWB. Specifically, the positive association between SSC and SWB is stronger at higher levels of SJB.

H6: SJB moderates the relationship between SoC and SWB. Specifically, the positive association between SoC and SWB is stronger at higher levels of SJB.

H7: SJB moderates the chain mediation effect of RD and SoC in the relationship between SSC and SWB. Specifically, the chain mediation effect is stronger at higher levels of SJB.

Methods

Research design

First, we employed a cross-sectional correlational design using data from the 2021 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) to examine the association between SSC and SWB. This analysis constituted Study 1 and was conducted to test Hypothesis 1. Building on Study 1, Study 2 adopted a questionnaire-based survey design to further examine the proposed psychological mechanisms. Specifically, Study 2 tested the mediating roles of RD and SoC in the association between SSC and SWB, as well as the moderating role of SJB. Data for Study 2 were collected via an online research platform using standardized psychological instruments. The research design and hypothesized relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

Study 1

Participants

Data were drawn from the 2021 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS; <http://cgss.ruc.edu.cn/>), a nationally representative dataset on individuals, families, work, and social attitudes (Zhang et al., 2024). The 2021 wave was selected as the latest release containing measures of SSC. Using stratified sampling, CGSS surveyed adults aged 18+ across mainland China. Of the 8148 respondents, cases with missing values or “don't know/refused to answer” responses on key variables were excluded, yielding a final valid sample of 2073 participants.

Measures

SSC. In CGSS 2021, SSC was measured using a self-assessment approach, which asked participants to rate their social class position on a hierarchy ladder (10 = highest, 1 = lowest) based on their personal perception.

OSC. OSC was assessed using three indicators: annual income, education, and occupation (Kraus et al., 2012).

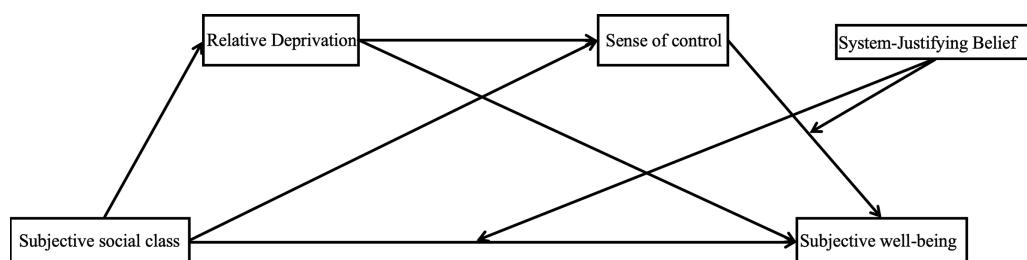


Figure 1. Proposed research model

Income ranged from “below 12,000 RMB” (1) to “above 1.2 million RMB” (10). Education was rated on a 13-point scale from “no formal education” (1) to “graduate degree or above” (13). Occupation was coded by the Ten Social Classes system commonly used in China, with scores from 1 to 10. All indicators were standardized and averaged to obtain the overall OSC score (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016).

SWB. SWB, as the dependent variable, was measured using the self-report question: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents the lowest level, and 10 represents the highest level, how would you rate your current level of SWB?”

Control Variables. Based on prior research, gender and age were incorporated as control variables, given their well-documented impact on SWB (Li et al., 2024). Age was derived from participants’ responses to the CGSS 2021 question, “What is your birth date?”. The survey year (2021) minus the reported birth year to calculate each participant’s age.

Data analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS 27.0. To account for the potential risk of common method bias (CMB) inherent in self-report questionnaires, Harman’s single-factor test was first performed prior to the main analyses. Following this, descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were carried out, and finally, multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis. The correlation analyses were conducted for key variables. The results show that SSC was positively correlated with SWB ($r = 0.282, p < 0.001$) and OSC ($r = 0.209, p < 0.001$). SSC was negatively correlated with age ($r = -0.043, p = 0.05$). In addition, OSC was positively associated with SWB ($r = 0.139, p < 0.001$) and negatively associated with age ($r = -0.445, p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis Testing. Hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between SSC and SWB (Table 1). Model 1 included control variables. Model 2 added OSC to Model 1. Model

3 further incorporated SSC into Model 2. The regression results showed that OSC was positively associated with SWB ($\beta = 0.106, p < 0.001$), and SSC was also positively associated with SWB ($\beta = 0.262, p < 0.001$). Additionally, the standardized regression coefficient of SSC was greater than that of OSC, suggesting a relatively more prominent role of SSC in this specific model. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Study 2

Participants

To ensure sampling consistency with Study 1, Study 2 employed an online questionnaire distributed through Credamo, a professional survey platform. Using convenience sampling, 600 questionnaires were distributed nationwide, and valid responses were collected from 25 provinces. After data screening, 567 valid responses were obtained, including 208 males. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Jiangxi University of Chinese Medicine (Approval No.: 20250326), and all participants provided informed consent.

Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire in a quiet setting during one session. After reading the study instructions outlining the research purpose and confidentiality, they provided informed consent by checking the “agree” box. Thus, all participants in this study provided informed consent. They then answered demographic items followed by the OSC, SSC, RD, SoC, and SJB scales. The same instructions, item order, and online administration procedure were used for all participants.

Measures

SSC. The MacArthur Scale is a widely used and well-validated measure of SSC (Chen et al., 2021). Participants were presented with a 10-rung ladder (Figure 2) and instructed to imagine that the ladder represents people’s positions in society. Each rung corresponded to different levels of social status, with the top rung (10) indicating the highest perceived social standing and the bottom (01) rung indicating the lowest. Higher scores indicated higher SSC.

RD. RD was measured using the scale developed by Ma (2012) to assess perceived relative deprivation.

Table 1. Hierarchical linear regression analysis

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Constant		0.159	42.784		0.177	35.192		0.191	27.427
Gender	−0.013	0.088	−0.586	0.016	0.089	0.717	−0.008	0.086	−0.376
Age	−0.007	0.003	−0.301	0.071	0.003	2.908**	0.052	0.003	2.202*
OSC				0.173	0.061	7.016***	0.106	0.06	4.335***
SSC							0.262	0.024	12.14***
F	F (2073) = 0.215			F (2073) = 16.557***			F (2073) = 50.139***		
R ²	R ² < 0.001			R ² = 0.023			R ² = 0.088		
ΔR^2	ΔR^2 < 0.001			ΔR^2 = 0.023			ΔR^2 = 0.065		

Note. SSC = subjective social class; OSC = objective social class. β is the standardized regression coefficient. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests), the same applies below.

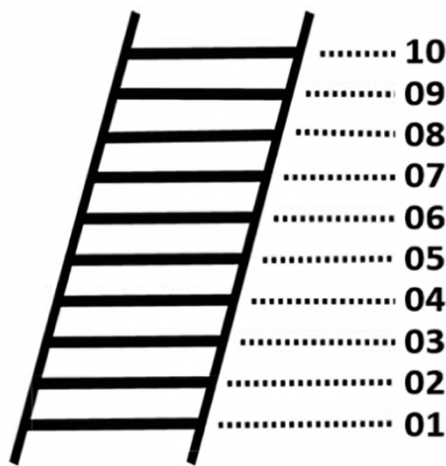


Figure 2. The ladder of subjective social status. *Note.* The bottom rung (01) represents people with the lowest perceived social standing, whereas the top rung (10) represents people with the highest perceived social standing. Intermediate numbers indicate progressively higher perceived social standing.

Responses were rated on a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger RD. The scale showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.798$). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) was 0.502, and the composite reliability (CR) reached 0.800, indicating acceptable convergent validity.

SoC. SoC was measured using the scale developed by Lachman and Weaver (1998), which has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in previous studies (Chen et al., 2021). The 12-item scale includes two dimensions: personal mastery (4 items) and perceived constraints (8 items, reverse scored). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The scale showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.931$) and acceptable convergent validity (AVE = 0.558, CR = 0.919).

SWB was measured with three components. Life satisfaction was assessed by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), which rated on a 7-point scale. Higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction, with a Cronbach's α of 0.904 in this study. Positive and negative affect were measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson et al., 1988), which includes 20 emotion adjectives (10 positive, 10 negatives; $\alpha = 0.929$ and 0.923, respectively). Following Chen et al. (2021), SWB was calculated by adding life satisfaction and positive affect scores and subtracting negative affect scores.

SJB. SJB was measured using the Chinese version of the SJB scale based on general SJB scale (Kay & Jost, 2003), which has demonstrated good reliability among Chinese samples in prior studies (Tan et al., 2016). The scale assesses participants' perceptions of fairness, legitimacy of the existing system. It consists of 8 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a higher level of system justification. The scale demonstrated strong reliability and validity (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$, AVE = 0.621, CR = 0.906).

Control Variables. Consistent with Study 1, OSC, gender and age were incorporated as control variables.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27 and Amos 26. CMB tests, descriptive statistics, and correlations were conducted in SPSS to examine variable relationships. Validity tests and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed in Amos to ensure measurement reliability and validity. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then applied to test the chain mediation model, and SPSS was used to examine the moderated mediation model. This multi-level analytical approach provided systematic and rigorous testing of the hypotheses.

Results

CMB Test and CFA. The CMB test showed that the first principal component explained 41.43% of the total variance, below the 50% threshold, indicating no serious common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). To assess multicollinearity, VIF diagnostics were conducted, and all values were below 2, confirming it was not a concern (Hair et al., 2019).

CFA was used to test the discriminant validity of four latent variables by comparing nested models. As shown in Table 2, the four-factor model demonstrated the best fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.819$, CFI = 0.955, TLI = 0.949, NFI = 0.955, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.04), indicating high discriminant validity and four distinct constructs (Wen et al., 2004).

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis. The results are presented in Table 3. The correlation analysis indicated that SSC, OSC, SoC, SJB, and SWB were all positively correlated with each other. RD was negatively correlated with OSC, SSC, SoC, SJB, and SWB.

Hypothesis Testing: Mediation Analysis Using SEM. To examine the mediation effect, SEM was performed while controlling for gender, age, and OSC. The model fit indices were: $\chi^2/df = 3.142$, RMSEA = 0.062, SRMR = 0.047, CFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.938, NFI = 0.925. These results indicate that the model fit was acceptable. SSC significantly negatively correlated with RD ($\beta = -0.334$, $p < 0.001$). RD was significantly negatively associated with SoC ($\beta = -0.664$, $p < 0.001$). SoC positively correlated with SWB ($\beta = 0.809$, $p < 0.001$). SSC was significantly positively associated with SoC ($\beta = 0.159$, $p < 0.001$). RD significantly negatively correlated with SWB ($\beta = -0.144$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, SSC showed a direct positive association with SWB ($\beta = 0.092$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with Hypothesis 1.

A bias-corrected percentile bootstrap approach with 5000 resamples was employed to examine mediation effects. As shown in Table 4, The mediating effect of RD in the relationship between SSC and SWB was significant. The 95% confidence interval (CI) was [0.011, 0.059], supporting Hypothesis 2. The mediating effect of SoC was also significant. The 95% CI was [0.037, 0.136], supporting Hypothesis 3. The chain mediation effect of RD and SoC was significant. The 95% CI was [0.080, 0.159], supporting Hypothesis 4.

Moderation Analysis. To examine the moderating role of SJB, we conducted an analysis using Model 1 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2022). Variables were mean-centered to mitigate potential multicollinearity

Table 2. Results of CFA

Model	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Four factors model: SoC, RD, SWB, SJB	2.819	0.955	0.949	0.955	0.057	0.04
Three factors model: SoC, RD + SWB, SJB	3.914	0.928	0.919	0.905	0.072	0.05
Two factors model: SoC + RD, SWB + SJB	7.358	0.84	0.823	0.84	0.106	0.078
One factors model: SoC + RD + SWB + SJB	8.592	0.807	0.788	0.788	0.116	0.079

Note. SJB = system-justifying belief; SWB = subjective well-being; RD = relative deprivation; SoC = sense of control. “+” represents models where two factors were merged.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Age	29.14	8.548	1							
2 Gender	0.633	0.482	-0.036	1						
3 OSC	5.821	1.289	0.348***	0.069	1					
4 SSC	5.51	1.264	0.146***	0.075	0.498***	1				
5 RD	2.632	0.879	-0.043	-0.077	-0.180***	-0.286***	1			
6 SoC	5.293	0.986	0.112**	0.002	0.259***	0.360***	-0.617***	1		
7 SJB	5.565	0.99	0.016	0.003	0.159***	0.308***	-0.621***	0.606***	1	
8 SWB	0	2.694	0.237**	-0.046	0.339***	0.428***	-0.626***	0.856***	0.670***	1

Note. SSC = subjective social class; OSC = objective social class; SJB = system-justifying belief; SWB = subjective well-being; RD = relative deprivation; SoC = sense of control; N = 567, M = mean; SD = standard deviation, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Bootstrap analysis of mediation effects

	Pathway	Point-Estimate	SE	z	Bias-Corrected 95% CI	Contribution (%)
Indirect Effect	SSC → RD → SoC → SWB	0.116	0.02	5.8	[0.080, 0.159]	40%
	SSC → RD → SWB	0.031	0.012	2.583	[0.011, 0.059]	11%
	SSC → SoC → SWB	0.083	0.025	3.32	[0.037, 0.136]	29%
Direct Effect	SSC → SWB	0.059	0.017	3.471	[0.028, 0.094]	20%
Total Effect	SSC → SWB	0.289	0.028	10.321	[0.235, 0.343]	100%

Note. SSC = subjective social class; SWB = subjective well-being; RD = relative deprivation; SoC = sense of control.

issues. The results indicated that SJB significantly moderated the relationship between SoC and SWB. Among individuals with low SJB, SoC is associated with SWB ($\beta = 1.817$, 95% CI [1.682, 1.950]). This relationship among individuals with high SJB was even stronger ($\beta = 2.037$, 95% CI [1.866, 2.207]). H6 was supported. Figure 3 illustrates the slopes of this moderating effect. However, SJB did not significantly moderate the relationship between SSC and SWB. Thus, Hypothesis H5 was not supported.

Moderated Chain Mediation Analysis. To further examine whether SJB moderates the chain mediation effect, this study conducted an analysis using Model 90 in SPSS (Hayes, 2022). After including control variables, the results showed that when SJB was low (M-SD), the indirect effect of SSC on SWB through RD and SoC was 0.188, 95% CI [0.111, 0.272] (not including zero), indicating a significant chain mediation effect. When SJB was high (M + SD), the indirect effect was 0.211, 95% CI [0.124, 0.309], demonstrating a significant chain mediation effect. The index of moderated mediation for the chain path was significant (Index = 0.012, Boot SE = 0.006, 95%

CI = [0.002, 0.025]). As SJB increased, the chain mediation effect of RD and SoC in the relationship between SSC and SWB became stronger, providing empirical support for Hypothesis H7. Figure 4 illustrates the integrated moderated chain mediation model.

Discussion

The two studies demonstrate that SSC shows a stronger association with SWB than OSC. This may be because SSC reflects individuals' perceived social standing and self-evaluation, which are more closely tied to emotions and affective experiences (Tan et al., 2020). Our results supported Hypothesis 2, showing that RD mediates the link between SSC and SWB. Social comparison is the core mechanism of RD (Smith et al., 2020). Classic RD theory suggests that deprivation from social comparison harms well-being (Smith et al., 2020). However, traditional perspectives focus predominantly on RD as a consequence of material resource inequalities. This study highlights SSC as a social-cognitive antecedent, identifying RD as a bridge between social status perception and well-being.

Second, this study also confirmed that SoC mediates the relationship between SSC and SWB, supporting

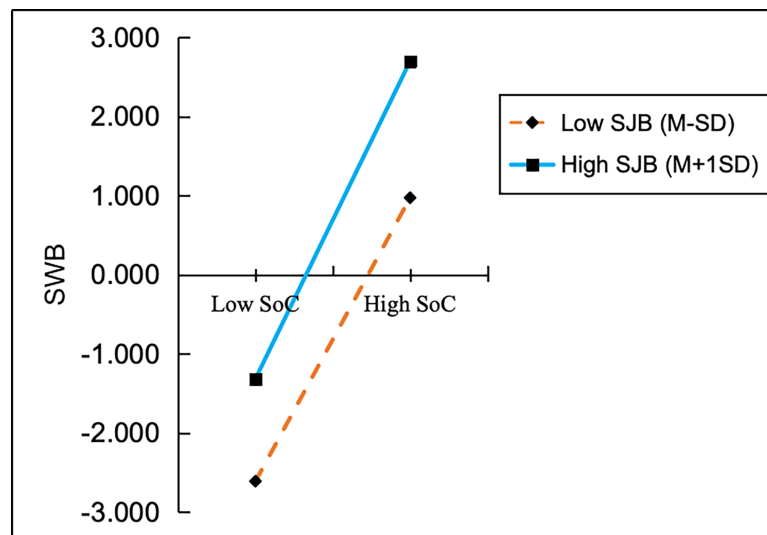


Figure 3. The moderating effects of SJB. *Note.* SJB = system-justifying belief; SoC = sense of control.

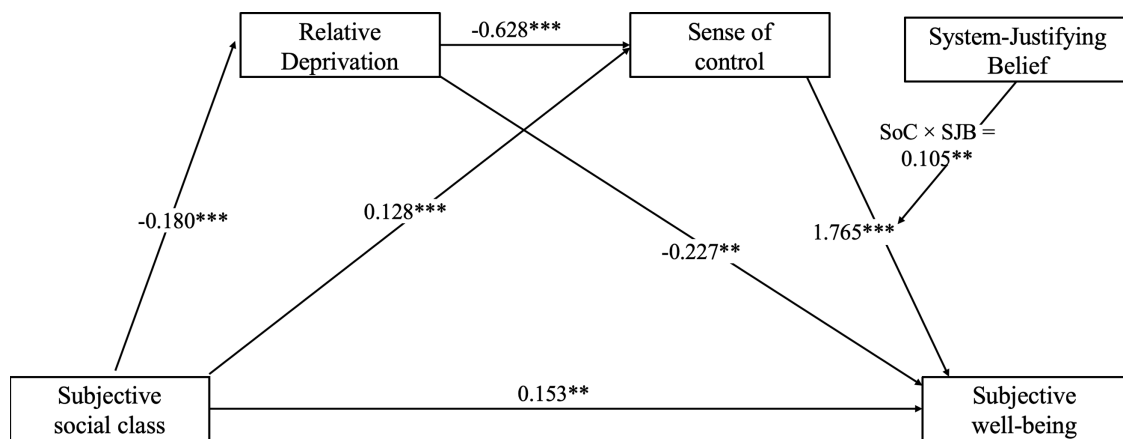


Figure 4. Moderated chain mediation model. *Note.* ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. For simplicity, the model diagram does not show the control variables. $N = 567$.

Hypothesis 3. This result aligns with the social cognition perspective on social class. Individuals who remain in lower SSC for prolonged periods tend to develop a communal self-concept, which is associated with weaker SoC (Kraus et al., 2012). Moreover, our findings further support the Self-Determination Theory, which posits that the fulfilling basic psychological needs is essential for well-being. As a fundamental psychological need, SoC is a crucial predictor of SWB (Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Therefore, lower SSC is associated with weaker SoC, which is further associated with lower SWB.

More importantly, this study found that relative deprivation and SoC play a chain mediating role between SSC and subjective well-being. Theoretically, these findings align with the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 2001), which posits that perceived resource loss may lead to adverse psychological outcomes via pathways such as reduced perceived control. The results also extend the personal relative poverty model. Specifically, unfavorable social comparisons are associated with heightened RD, which in turn is linked to diminished psychological resources and a weaker SoC. Lower SoC may be associated

with poorer stress management and lower positive affect, which may in turn relate to lower subjective well-being.

It is worth noting that SJB moderates the chain mediation effect, particularly in the “SoC $\rightarrow$ SWB” pathway. Previous studies based on U.S. samples have found that low-status individuals who endorse elitist beliefs tend to have stronger SoC, which contributes to better health conditions (McCoy et al., 2013). Our study further validated and extended this finding, suggesting that SJB may be associated with stronger SoC and higher SWB among lower-class individuals. This finding expands the Compensatory Control Theory (Kay et al., 2009), which suggests that when individuals lack an SoC, endorsing SJB helps them psychologically compensate by perceiving external order and predictability. This, in turn, reduces negative emotions stemming from low control (Vargas-Salfate, 2019). Thus, SJB is an effective compensatory mechanism, providing individuals with a structured worldview that enhances their SoC, a key determinant of psychological well-being (Thompson, 2021).

Furthermore, interpreting our findings through a cultural lens provides a more nuanced understanding of

the observed mechanisms. In the Chinese cultural context, which is profoundly influenced by Confucian values emphasizing social harmony, collective order, and hierarchy (Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In such societies, individuals are culturally socialized to accept structural inequalities to maintain systemic stability. Consequently, for lower-class individuals experiencing a depleted SoC, endorsing SJB aligns with cultural expectations of secondary control—adjusting oneself to the environment rather than actively challenging it (Morling & Evered, 2006). Thus, the palliative function of System Justifying Beliefs (SJB) may be particularly adaptive.

However, SJB did not significantly moderate the direct relationship between SSC and SWB. One possible explanation is that SSC and SJB may operate at different psychological levels. SSC reflects individuals' subjective evaluation of their relative position within the social hierarchy, whereas SJB reflects broader beliefs regarding the fairness, legitimacy, and rationality of the social system. Therefore, SJB may not directly alter how individuals perceive their own social standing or how such perceptions relate to SWB.

Instead, SJB may be more closely related to how individuals interpret and cope with the psychological consequences of perceived disadvantage, particularly under conditions of reduced SoC. This interpretation is consistent with system justification theory, which suggests that SJB may serve a palliative function by helping individuals make sense of inequality and maintain a sense of social order (Jost, 2019). From this perspective, SJB may not weaken the direct SSC–SWB relationship. Rather, it may function more prominently as a cognitive adaptation resource in the association between SoC and SWB. This perspective may help explain why H5 was not supported, whereas the moderating role of SJB in the SoC–SWB association remained significant.

Theoretical contributions

First, this study extends current understanding of the psychological mechanisms linking SSC and SWB by identifying a sequential psychological pathway involving RD and SoC. Whereas prior research has primarily focused on direct associations or isolated psychological mediators, the present study integrates emotional and control-related processes within a unified framework. Specifically, the findings suggest that unfavorable social comparisons associated with lower SSC may relate to heightened feelings of deprivation, which may further relate to diminished perceptions of personal control. This perspective extends previous SSC–SWB research by suggesting that subjective social disadvantage may be associated with well-being not only through emotional dissatisfaction, but also through reduced SoC. In doing so, the present study contributes to a more process-oriented perspective on how individuals psychologically interpret and adapt to perceived social inequality.

Second, this study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the palliative function of SJB among disadvantaged groups. By integrating system justification theory with compensatory control theory, the present findings

help clarify the potentially distinct role of SJB in the SSC–SWB relationship. Notably, SJB moderated the association between SoC and SWB, but did not significantly moderate the direct SSC–SWB association. This pattern may suggest that SJB does not directly shape individuals' subjective evaluations of their social position. Instead, it may function more prominently as a cognitive adaptation resource under conditions of reduced perceived control. For lower-SSC individuals experiencing diminished SoC, endorsing SJB may provide a more structured and predictable interpretation of the social world, thereby buffering some of the psychological consequences associated with reduced control. Taken together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how system-level beliefs may shape psychological adaptation to perceived social disadvantage.

Practical implications

This study provides guidance for improving SWB among individuals with lower SSC. While the coefficients the SSC–SWB link in our model are relatively small, this is theoretically expected. Subjective well-being is a multiply determined construct, meaning any single socio-cognitive variable is unlikely to explain a massive proportion of variance. Furthermore, methodological guidelines emphasize that statistically small effects (e.g., $r = 0.10$) hold substantial cumulative and practical significance when dealing with persistent structural factors like social class (Funder & Ozer, 2019). Therefore, identifying the specific mechanisms (RD and SoC) driving this link still provides crucial, targeted insights for psychological interventions. Specifically, reducing RD is key and can be achieved by promoting fair resource distribution and encouraging lateral rather than upward comparisons. Second, enhancing SoC through greater access to education and psychological counseling to build self-efficacy is essential. Finally, fostering moderate SJB may serve as a cognitive lever, enabling the pathway of “RD reduction → SoC enhancement → SWB improvement.” This mechanism provides a novel approach to psychological interventions for disadvantaged groups. In cases where structural inequalities cannot be immediately resolved, cognitive interventions to strengthen individuals' expectations for systemic improvement may serve as a key strategy for enhancing psychological adaptation.

Limitations and future directions

Study 1 used secondary data from a large-scale survey, which improved external validity but limited variable selection and measurement accuracy. Specifically, SWB was measured with a single item, which provided only a brief global indicator of SWB, and may not fully capture the multidimensional nature of SWB. To address this, Study 2 collected original data with validated instruments, allowing more precise measurement. However, Study 2 remained cross-sectional; as Rohrer et al. (2022) note, such designs cannot confirm causal mediation. Future longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to verify the proposed pathways. Furthermore, the current study relied on online convenience samples, and the samples

showed some demographic imbalance, including a relatively young average age and a higher proportion of female participants. In addition, the convenience sampling approach also resulted in demographic differences, particularly in age composition, between Study 1 and Study 2. Although age and other demographic variables were statistically controlled as covariates in the analyses, demographic differences between the two samples remain a methodological limitation. Future research could further examine these findings using more diverse, age-balanced, and representative samples and assess the generalizability of the proposed mechanisms across different populations.

While our findings offer empirical support for the palliative function of SJB, we solely examined its positive psychological outcomes. Existing literature posits that endorsing SJB often operates as a “double-edged sword” (Xu et al., 2024). In the short term, SJB may buffer negative experiences and enhance SWB by serving a palliative function (Jost, 2019). In the long term, however, SJB may hinder social change and development. Specifically, stronger SJBs weaken individuals’ negative emotional reactions toward the social system (e.g., anger), thereby reducing their willingness to take actions aimed at improving social conditions, such as supporting redistributive policies (Wakslak et al., 2007) or participating in collective actions to reduce inequality (Solak et al., 2021). Because our research design did not incorporate variables to capture these potential negative consequences, our practical implications are inherently bounded. Future research should adopt a more comprehensive approach to simultaneously investigate both the short-term protective benefits and the potential long-term costs of relying on the palliative function of SJB.

Conclusion

This study concludes that SSC is significantly associated with SWB through a chain mediation involving RD and SoC. Moreover, SJB moderates this relationship, with stronger SJB reinforcing the positive association between SSC and SWB.

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20250326). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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