

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 in several developed countries, it is increasingly important to understand the psychological effects of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. While prior research shows a link between high socioeconomic status (SES) and psychological entitlement, we explore the possibility that among currently high SES individuals, those from affluent backgrounds are especially inclined to these feelings of unique deservingness. A meta-analysis of four exploratory studies (total $N=3,105$) found an interaction of current and childhood SES on entitlement, such that currently high SES individuals who were also raised in high SES households were uniquely high in entitlement, a pattern that was robust across three indicators of SES: income, education, and subjective SES. Results of a pre-registered, confirmatory study ($N=1,058$) replicated this interactive pattern for education and subjective SES. Additional exploratory analyses suggested that, among high SES individuals, entitlement was related to opposition to poverty relief programs. Our findings highlight the importance of considering current and childhood SES jointly to understand the psychological consequences of SES, and suggest that societies with limited socioeconomic mobility may be uniquely likely to feature high entitlement among their most privileged members, feelings that can lead them to oppose redistributive social policies.

Keywords: socioeconomic status, income, education, entitlement

Rates of intergenerational social mobility are declining in many developed countries (Berman, 2019; Chetty, Grusky, Hell, Hendren, Manduca, & Narang, 2017), making it more likely that those born into high socioeconomic status (SES) households will maintain that standing in adulthood, while those born into less privileged circumstances will be much less likely to achieve high SES. It is therefore increasingly important to understand the psychological effects of entrenched socioeconomic privilege. Do higher socioeconomic status individuals from affluent backgrounds have different views of themselves and society than others, including the upwardly mobile? Understanding the beliefs of “stationary high SES” individuals (i.e., individuals with both currently high 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 of their parents, 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, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). This research, however, has rarely examined current and childhood SES simultaneously to identify the potentially unique beliefs of those who have high levels of both, compared to 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 to feelings of *psychological entitlement*—beliefs that one is more important and deserving of resources and privileges than others (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Feelings of entitlement are associated with a host of antisocial behaviors, including more selfish

behavior and rule-breaking in the workplace and less empathy and respect for others (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Yam, Klotz, He, & Reynolds, 2016; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). For that reason, it is important to identify factors that might give rise to these feelings. Past findings converge to suggest that SES is a candidate antecedent of entitlement (e.g., Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 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. Further, we explore the possible consequences of feelings of entitlement for views of redistributive social policies, like poverty relief programs.

Our investigation increases our understanding of the psychological effects of entrenched socioeconomic privilege in several ways. First, while past work has considered either childhood SES or current SES, we examine whether they are jointly associated with feelings of entitlement. In a meta-analysis of exploratory studies and a pre-registered, confirmatory study, we test competing models of how childhood and current SES relate to entitlement. Second, to identify the robustness of the findings across indicators of SES, we construe SES in both objective terms (income and education) and subjective terms (self-perceived social rank in a community; Kraus et al., 2012), and compare the results across the indicators. Finally, we explore a potential consequence of entitlement among higher SES individuals: opposition to redistributive social policies, such as poverty relief programs. Our investigation extends past research by testing whether individuals with high childhood SES and current SES feel more entitled than everyone else, ascertaining the robustness of this pattern across indicators of SES, and exploring if entitlement in turn relates to opposition to redistribution.

Previous Research on SES and Psychological Entitlement

Several studies found that higher SES individuals have especially strong feelings of psychological entitlement. Individuals who have high income (Foster et al., 2003), have high net

worth (Leckelt, Richter, Schröder, Kufner, Grabka, & Back, in press), feel wealthy (Piff, 2014), or self-identify as rich or high SES (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 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, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016). From these studies, we can infer that feelings of entitlement are most pronounced among the most privileged members of society. This inference might be incomplete, however, if some high SES individuals feel highly entitled while other high SES individuals do 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, Ellis, & Kirby, 1954; Martin & Côté, in press). These models suggest that stationary high SES and upwardly mobile individuals might have different beliefs, including different levels of entitlement. To completely understand the relationship between SES and entitlement, we might need an interactive approach whereby the relationship between current SES and entitlement varies depending on childhood SES. To our knowledge, the interaction between current and childhood SES predicting entitlement has never been tested. Thus, it remains unknown if stationary high SES 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 four 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 Childhood SES and High Current SES

Cultural theories of inequality propose that SES is associated with several aspects of individuals' lifestyles, with individuals from distinct class standings exhibiting different everyday behaviors, traits, and preferences across myriad 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—to be markers of sophistication and refinement. Stationary high SES individuals may develop particularly strong feelings of cultural superiority—feelings that their preferences and habits are especially sophisticated and refined—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). In addition, stationary high SES individuals lack exposure to lower SES environments that could dispel the notion that the lifestyle associated with a high SES standing is inherently superior. By comparison, upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals may feel less culturally superior because their exposure to low SES environments may have dispelled the notion that highbrow activities are inherently better. Feelings of cultural superiority might, in turn, lead to entitlement, because the possession of refined characteristics thought to be inherently better (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Rahman Khan, 2012) could lead people to view themselves as more worthy and entitled to superior treatment and rewards.

The sustained privilege model posits that owing to feelings of cultural superiority, feelings of entitlement to more privileges and resources are especially pronounced among stationary high SES individuals. This should be reflected an interaction between childhood and current 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. 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

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 personally responsible for their successes and perceive that they have achieved them through their own actions, rather than through resources and opportunities granted by their family background. The upwardly mobile may interpret their currently high standing in society as evidence of their uniquely high talent and drive. Further, individuals who achieve upward mobility are often more admired (Chetty et al., 2017). In the U.S., upwardly mobile people are perceived to epitomize the American Dream, the promise that people who work hard will have a better life (Chetty et al., 2017). Upwardly mobile individuals may interpret others' admiration as an additional indicator of their unique talent and drive. By contrast, stationary high SES individuals may have less evidence to perceive 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, Erixson, & Ohlsson, 2012). The currently low standing of downwardly mobile and stationary low SES individuals may also undermine self-perceptions as uniquely talented and motivated, preventing feelings of entitlement. Widely held meritocratic beliefs prescribe that superior talent and drive should be compensated at higher levels (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). Upwardly mobile individuals might apply these beliefs to their own situation and conclude that they should receive more privileges and rewards than others.

The mobility model thus posits that upwardly mobile individuals feel especially entitled to more resources and privileges because they are more likely to make self-serving attributions about their improved status. This should be reflected in an interaction between childhood and current 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. 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. One possibility is that childhood SES uniquely determines entitlement. In Panel C of Figure 1, people with higher childhood SES have higher levels of entitlement than their counterparts with lower childhood SES, while people with higher current SES feel the same levels of entitlement as people with lower current SES. This model is consistent with life course socialization research suggesting that attitudes are acquired during specific period of development, and are 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. These individuals may grow up thinking they are special, and maintain this belief throughout their lives, regardless of their future circumstances. Notably, according to the childhood SES model, a correlation between current SES and entitlement emerges spuriously, because current and childhood SES are correlated. When both childhood and current SES are entered in a regression model predicting entitlement, only childhood SES should be associated with entitlement.

The current SES only model. Another possibility is that one's current SES is the driving force that shapes entitlement. Individuals may feel more entitled to the extent that their present day success cause them to feel they deserve more resources and special privileges. In Panel D of Figure 1, individuals with higher current SES have higher levels of entitlement than those with lower current SES, while individuals with higher childhood SES are comparable to those with lower childhood SES. This model assumes that current circumstances are highly salient, while past conditions are largely irrelevant in determining how deserving one feels. According to the current SES only model, a correlation between childhood SES and entitlement emerges spuriously because current and childhood SES are correlated. When both childhood and current SES are entered in a model, only current SES is associated with entitlement.

The additive model. Current and childhood SES might have separate, linear relationships with entitlement. 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. 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 childhood and current SES are entered in a model, they are both positively associated with entitlement. Further, in this approach the interaction term between childhood and current SES is not significant, because an interaction would reveal that childhood and current 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. Specifically, we meta-analyzed the results from four samples of participants that 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 follow-up pre-registered, confirmatory study in the second phase. In this second phase, we also explored a potential consequence of entitlement among higher SES individuals: opposition to redistributive social policies.

Study 1: Exploratory Meta-Analysis

We first explored the competing models of how childhood and current SES relate to entitlement by integrating the results of four samples of United States residents that included the relevant measures (total $N = 3,105$) using meta-analysis (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009). Questionnaires, data, and R code for each of the primary studies and the meta-analysis are available at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/cjxv9a6qmwjy1qx/AABUCcdX6uknmXh6wwlSey9Ka?dl=0>

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited from Clearvoice (Samples 1 and 2) or 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 Table S1. 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 on 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 \$0 (no income) to \$250,000 or more. Participants in Samples 2 and 3 chose among 15 options ranging from \$0-\$9,999 to \$250,000 or more. Participants in Sample 4 chose among 22 options ranging from \$0 (no income) to \$500,000 or more. To assign a value for the highest category, we adopted a strategy frequently used in sociological research involving extrapolating from the midpoint of the second-highest income bracket, using frequencies for the second-highest and highest brackets (Hout, 2004; Parker & Fenwick, 1983). 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 were consistent with the findings of the other samples.

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 (few) participants who chose “Other,” 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, Tybur, Delton, & Robertson, 2011). Internal reliability was high ($\alpha = .86$ to $.89$). 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 $r = .49$, $p < .001$, $CI = .42$ to $.57$). 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 were asked to report their parents’ annual income when they were growing up (between ages 0-18), 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 $r = .57, p < .001, CI = .49$ to $.64$). We thus aggregated the scores to create one score for parents' education.

We used the same scales, adapted to represent childhood 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 ($\alpha = .78$ to $.87$). 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 0-18): 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 $r = .72, p < .001, CI = .66$ to $.78$). 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 honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others” and “Great things should come to me”) on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. This measure converges with other measures of entitlement, and shows small correlations with measures of distinct constructs such as 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 ($\alpha = .90$ to $.91$).

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 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 probe any interactions by meta-analyzing the simple slopes for the association between current SES and entitlement at different 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 and lower current SES participants (Irwin & McClelland, 2001).

We inferred support for the sustained privilege hypothesis if the interaction term was significant, there was significant positive association between current SES and entitlement among participants with higher childhood SES, but not among participants with lower childhood SES, and there was significant positive association between childhood SES and entitlement among participants with higher current SES, but not among participants with lower current SES. We inferred support for the mobility hypothesis if the interaction term was significant, there was a significant positive association between current SES and entitlement among participants with lower childhood SES, but not among participants with higher childhood SES, and there was significant negative association between childhood SES and entitlement among participants with higher current SES, but not among participants with lower current SES.

We inferred support for the only childhood SES hypothesis if the coefficient for childhood SES was positive, and neither the coefficient for current SES nor the interaction term was significant. Similarly, we inferred support for the only current SES hypothesis if the coefficient for current SES was positive, and neither the coefficient for childhood SES nor the

interaction term was significant. We inferred supported for an additive model if the coefficients for childhood and current SES were both significantly positive, and the interaction was not significant (because this hypothesis, and its equivalent “average” hypothesis, posits that the effects of childhood and current SES occur separately from each other).

Results

Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics for the measures of SES and entitlement appear in the first four sets of columns in Table S3. Inspection of the means and standard deviations indicates that individuals with higher levels of childhood and current SES showed comparable means over time and can thus be considered to have stationary high SES. Individuals with lower levels of childhood SES and higher levels of current SES showed increases in the means over time and can be considered upwardly mobile. Those with lower levels of childhood and current SES showed comparable means over time and can be considered stationary low SES. Individuals with higher levels of childhood SES and lower levels of current SES showed decreases in the means over time and can be considered downwardly mobile.

Correlations. Meta-analytic correlations among the variables appear in Table S4. The correlations between childhood and current SES were significantly positive and moderate in size, signifying inter-generational consistency in SES, but also changes in the rank ordering of individuals over time. Thus, we observed some mobility in these samples.

Tests of childhood and current SES and entitlement.

Income. Meta-analytic coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for parental income, personal income, and the interaction term appear in Table 1. For income, the meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction was .04, with a confidence interval that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction for the combined sample (see Figure 2, Panel A) and the individual studies (see Figure 2, Panels B-E) supports the sustained privilege hypothesis. Meta-analytic simple slopes

that formally describe the interaction also appear in Table 1. Income was positively associated with entitlement among participants with higher parental income, but not among participants with lower parental income. Further, higher income participants felt more entitled if their parents had higher income, compared to lower income. By contrast, lower income individuals reported low levels of entitlement, regardless of how much their parents earned. Results of reported in Table S5 indicate that the results were virtually the same when controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age, revealing that the results were not spuriously caused by these demographic factors. Thus, all of the criteria to infer support for the sustained privilege hypothesis were met. Higher income individuals with higher income parents felt the most entitled.

Education. The meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction between education and parental education was .07, with a confidence interval that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction displayed in Figure 3 supports the sustained privilege hypothesis. Simple slopes reported in Table 1 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. Further, 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 of the criteria to infer support for the sustained privileged hypothesis were met. Highly educated individuals with highly educated parents felt the most entitled.

Subjective SES. The meta-analytic coefficient for the interaction between current and childhood subjective SES was .08, with a confidence interval that excluded 0. The pattern of interaction shown in Figure 4 is again consistent with the sustained privilege hypothesis. Simple slopes shown in Table 1 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. Further, 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 of the criteria to infer support for the sustained privileged hypothesis were met. The most entitled individual felt that they had high ranking in society both during their childhoods and currently.

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 childhood and current SES and entitlement. Therefore, in the next step, we tested the sustained privilege hypothesis in a pre-registered, confirmatory study.

Further, to illuminate the potential manifestations of entitlement, we explored one of its likely consequences. We posited that feeling entitled to resources and privileges might cause higher SES individuals to oppose redistributive social policies that would transfer their resources to the under-privileged (Ho et al., 2012). Entitlement should less strongly predict opposition to these policies among lower SES individuals, because these policies take away fewer or no resources away from those who have little. We tested whether the positive association between entitlement and opposition to redistributive social policies is more pronounced among individuals with higher current SES than among individuals with lower current SES. We also tested a complete model whereby childhood and current SES jointly relate to entitlement, which in turn relates to opposition to redistributive social policies among currently higher SES individuals. The complete model of SES, entitlement, and opposite to redistributive policies is visually displayed in Figure S1.

The pre-registration document, questionnaire, data, and R code for analysis are available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/cjxv9a6qmwjy1qx/AABUCcdX6uknmXh6wwlSey9Ka?dl=0>.

Our analysis of opposition to redistributive social policies was exploratory, and thus does not appear on the pre-registration document.

Method

Participants. We recruited 1,058 participants 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 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, opposition to redistributive social policies, and demographic characteristics. We also measured other variables for separate investigations.

Measures.

Current SES. Participants reported their personal income during the previous year by choosing among 31 options ranging from \$0 (no income) to \$1,000,000 or more. We had to deviate from the pre-registration because the formula developed by Hout (2004) that we pre-registered involves a division by the number of observations in the second largest category, and there were no observations in that category. The formula does not produce any value because, in this case, it involves a division by 0. Therefore, instead of using the Hout formula, we used a strategy used in past research (e.g., Côté, House, & Willer, 2015). We assigned the lower-bound (\$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, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 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 3-item scale that we administered in three of the exploratory studies ($\alpha = .86$; Griskevicius et al., 2011). The two measures were correlated ($r = .58, p < .001$). We only included the McArthur scale in our pre-registration by mistake. Thus, we deviated from the pre-registration document, yet stayed consistent with our measurement strategy in the exploratory stage and our previous research, by standardizing and aggregating the scores on the two measures to create a composite score for current subjective SES. As we report below, the results were similar when we repeated the analysis using only the McArthur scale.

Childhood SES. Participants were asked to report their mothers’ and fathers’ annual incomes when they were growing up (between ages 0-18), 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 subjective childhood 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 3-item scale that we administered in three of the exploratory studies ($\alpha = .82$; Griskevicius et al., 2011). The two scales were highly correlated ($r = .70, p < .001$). Again, we only included the McArthur scale in our pre-registration by mistake. We deviated from the pre-registration by standardizing and then aggregating the scores on the two measures to create a composite score for childhood subjective SES. As we report below, the results were similar with only the McArthur scale.

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

Opposition to redistributive social policies. Participants indicated the degree to which they supported or opposed three policies (“Giving greater assistance to the poor,” “Reducing public support for the homeless,” and “Reducing benefits for the unemployed”) on a scale of 1 (*extremely opposed*) to 7 (*extremely supportive*; $\alpha = .80$; Ho et al., 2012). We reversed the scores so that a higher score denotes more opposition to redistributive social policies.

Analytical Strategy

We tested the sustained privilege hypothesis using regression analysis. We again inferred support for the sustained privilege hypothesis if the interaction term was significant, there was significant positive association between current SES and entitlement among participants with higher childhood SES, but not among participants with lower childhood SES, and there was

significant positive association between childhood SES and entitlement among participants with higher current SES, but not among participants with lower current SES.

In exploratory analyses, we used regression analysis to test whether there was a positive association between entitlement and opposition to redistributive social policies among higher current SES individuals. We tested the full model displayed in Figure S1 using bootstrap confidence intervals.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics for the measures of SES and entitlement appear in Table S6. As expected, stationary high SES individuals had high means for childhood and current SES, across the three facets of SES. Also, upwardly mobile individuals had low means for childhood SES and high means for current SES, stationary low SES individuals had low means for both childhood and current SES, and downwardly mobile individuals had low means for childhood SES and high means for current SES.

Correlations. Correlations among the variables appear in Table S7. The correlations between childhood and current SES were again significantly positive and moderate in size, signifying both some inter-generational consistency in SES and some mobility. As expected, entitlement was significantly correlated with opposition to redistributive policies.

Test of sustained privilege hypothesis. The detailed results of the regression analyses appear in Table 2.

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 Panel A of Figure 5.

To inform future research, we conducted additional exploratory analyses. For our confirmatory test of the sustained privilege hypothesis, we could not implement our pre-registered strategy for assigning a value to the highest income category, because it involved a division by 0 in this case. In addition, there were also outliers that were 3.29 standard deviations above the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), which we did not expect. When we repeated this analysis after removing the outliers, as well as anomalous observations where personal income exceeded household income (which was defined as income received by participants and other people living in their household), the interaction term was significant, $B = .002$, $p < .05$, and the shape of the interaction was consistent with the sustained privilege hypothesis. Although this support is exploratory and tentative, it suggests that the strategy that is adopted to identify the highest levels of childhood and current income has important consequences for the results.

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, $B = .26$, $SE = .04$, $t = 5.89$, $p < .001$, but there was no association among participants whose parents were less educated, $B = .02$, $SE = .05$, $t = .37$, $p = .72$. Further, among highly educated participants, those with more highly educated parents felt more entitled than those whose parents were less educated, $B = .13$, $SE = .04$, $t = 3.27$, $p < .01$. Among participants with less education, those with more highly educated parents felt less entitled than those whose parents were less educated, $B = -.08$, $SE = .04$, $t = -2.02$, $p < .05$. Results reported in 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 Panel B 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, $B = .22$, $SE = .06$, $t = 3.82$, $p < .001$, but there was no association among participants with low childhood subjective SES, $B = -.06$, $SE = .06$, $t = -.96$, $p = .34$. Further, among individuals with higher current subjective SES, those with higher childhood subjective SES felt more entitled than those with lower childhood subjective SES, $B = .25$, $SE = .06$, $t = 4.35$, $p < .001$, but among individuals with lower current subjective SES, the reverse was true, $B = -.06$, $SE = .06$, $t = -.38$, $p = .70$. The interaction resisted controls for gender, ethnicity, and age (see Table S8). Thus, the criteria to infer support for the sustained privilege hypothesis were met for subjective SES. The interaction can be seen in Panel C 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 test of childhood and current SES, entitlement, and opposition to redistributive social policies. The results shown in Table S9 and Figure S2 reveal significant interactions between entitlement and current SES for education and subjective SES. In both of these cases, the positive association between entitlement and opposition to redistributive policies was more pronounced among currently higher SES than among currently lower SES individuals. Further, among currently higher SES individuals, those who felt more entitled were more opposed to redistributive policies than those with lower levels of entitlement. Among currently lower SES individuals, entitlement was not related to opposition to redistributive social policies.

We conducted a bootstrap mediation test to test the full model positing that childhood and current SES interact to predict entitlement, which in turn predicts opposition to redistributive

social policies more strongly for currently higher SES individuals than currently lower SES individuals. The bootstrap mediation test supported the model for education, estimate = $-.01$, $SE = .003$, $CI = -.02$ to $-.002$, and subjective SES, estimate = $-.02$, $SE = .01$, $CI = -.03$ to $-.004$.

General Discussion

In this research, we examined if feelings of entitlement are especially high among individuals with high childhood and current 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, nor by those who have never known privilege. This pattern was replicated for two indicators of SES, education and subjective SES, in a pre-registered, confirmatory study. In addition, we identified one potential consequence of feelings of entitlement: opposition to redistributive social policies among higher SES individuals.

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 in many developed countries is that many of their highest-ranking members believe they are particularly deserving of resources and privileges.

Our research highlights the critical importance of considering childhood and current SES jointly to accurately understand its association with entitlement, and possibly other attitudes and behaviors. Because social mobility is limited and childhood and current 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. Further, the results suggest that both might play a childhood and current 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.

Our analyses of the difference between stationary high SES and upwardly mobile individuals advances 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 seem 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.

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 designed to increase social mobility in the population.

Robustness of Results across Indicators of SES

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 exploratory stage suggested that income might operate like education and subjective SES, but the confirmatory stage suggested that current income might be the driving force shaping entitlement. Subsidiary analyses reveal 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 future research, participants could be asked to correct their responses, or the decision could be made a priori to remove anomalous observations from the analyses.

Limitations and Future Research

Our investigation has several limitations. 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, while those who do not feel entitled might lose their social standing. Longitudinal data could be obtained to examine how changes in SES correspond to changes in entitlement over time.

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. We believe this issue is more concerning for income than for education. Most people are likely aware of their parents' education, which is objective information that is often discussed between family members. It is possible that the interaction was less robust for income because it is more difficult to reliably report parental income than parental education. Some participants might not have remembered or have 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 not highly inaccurate, because excessively noisy measurement would have made it impossible to detect an interaction. At the same time, the limitations of asking participants to report their parents' income might explain why income was the only facet of SES that did not

replicate in the confirmatory study. To address this limitation, parents could be asked to report their income.

We assessed participants' current SES and their SES in their childhoods. We acknowledge that 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, however, 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 some stationary high SES participants moved around 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.

Future research could further explore other downstream consequences of greater entitlement among people with sustained privilege. In exploratory analyses, we found tentative evidence for one potential consequence of entitlement among higher SES individuals: opposition to redistributive social policies. It is important to replicate this finding in future confirmatory research with new data. If this finding is replicated, it would help to explain why privileged individuals are reluctant to part with their resources to benefit disadvantaged members of society.

Finally, 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 if the patterns hold with other measures.

Conclusion

By modeling both childhood and current SES, we detected a pattern that was not apparent in past research on SES entitlement. Across two facets of SES (education and subjective SES),

the most entitled individuals were those who experienced sustained privilege—those who had a combination of high childhood and high current SES. Further, individuals who have known seem to sustained privilege oppose social safety net and poverty relief programs, and may act to prevent the deployment of these programs, for example by voting for politicians who oppose them. This suggests a potential self-perpetuating cycle whereby limited social mobility exacerbate entitled feelings that, turn, limit support for the types of social policies that could boost mobility. Interventions to reduce entitlement among stationary high SES individuals might be necessary to break this cycle.

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Table 1

Meta-Analytic Regression Results and Simple Slopes at High and Low Levels of Current and Childhood SES Predicting Entitlement – Exploratory Stage

	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 [.03 to .10]	.03 [-.005 to .07]	.04 [.01 to .08]	.11 [.07 to .15]	.04 [-.002 to .08]	.09 [.04 to .13]	.01 [-.04 to .05]
Education	.01 [-.03 to .05]	.02 [-.01 to .06]	.07 [.03 to .10]	.08 [.03 to .13]	-.05 [-.11 to .003]	.06 [.02 to .11]	-.04 [-.10 to .01]
Subjective SES	.07 [.03 to .10]	.06 [.03 to .10]	.08 [.05 to .12]	.15 [.10 to .19]	-.02 [-.07 to .03]	.15 [.11 to .19]	-.02 [-.07 to .02]

Note. Parameters are sample-size weighted mean 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 regression coefficients.

Table 2

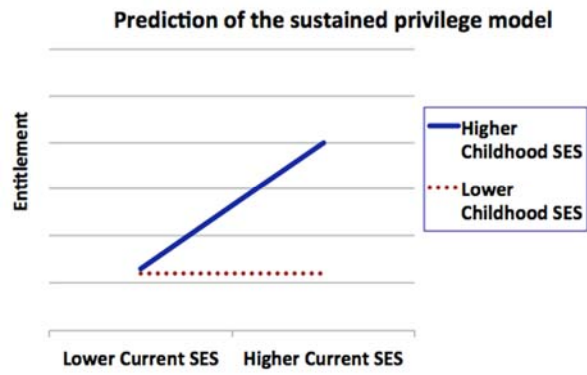
Regression Results – Confirmatory Stage

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	3.07	.04	75.26***
Childhood Subjective SES	.11	.05	2.51*
Current Subjective SES	.08	.05	1.72
Childhood X Current Subjective SES	.15	.04	3.69***
Intercept	3.13	.04	83.12***
Parental Income	.001	.004	.30
Current Income	.03	.01	5.55***
Parental X Current Income	-.00002	.0001	-.30
Intercept	3.08	.04	79.29***
Parental Education	.02	.03	.77
Current Education	.14	.03	4.06***
Parental X Current Education	.09	.02	3.96***

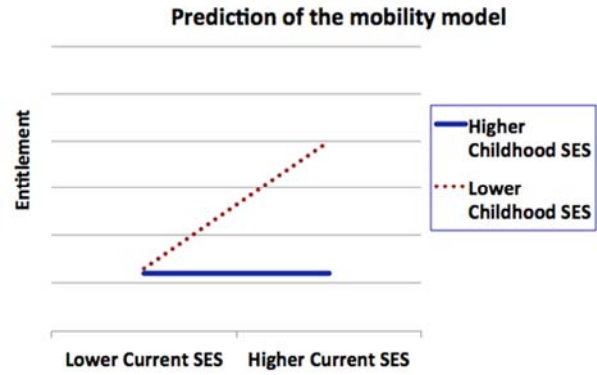
Note. *B* = unstandardized parameter estimate. *SE* = standard error.

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

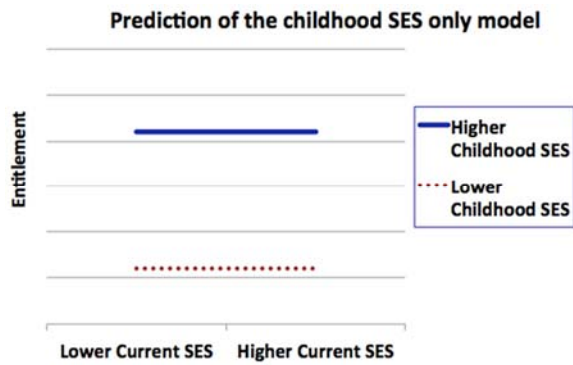
A



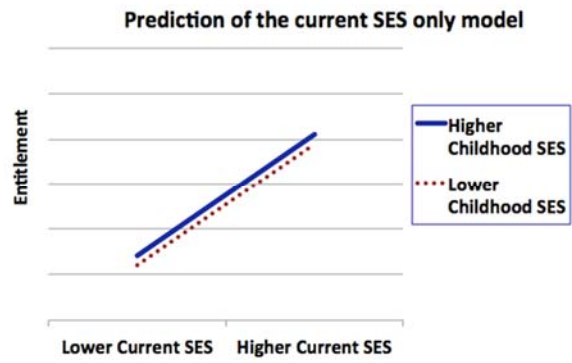
B



C



D



E

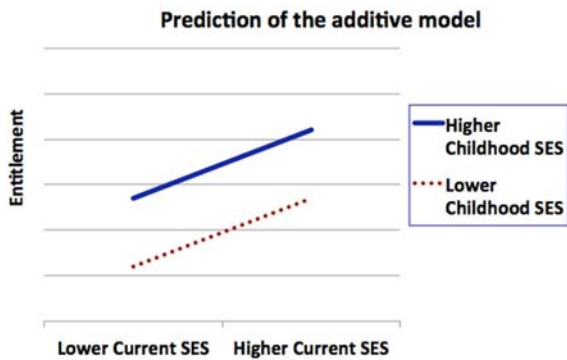


Figure 1. Patterns predicted by each of the five competing models of childhood SES, current SES, and entitlement.

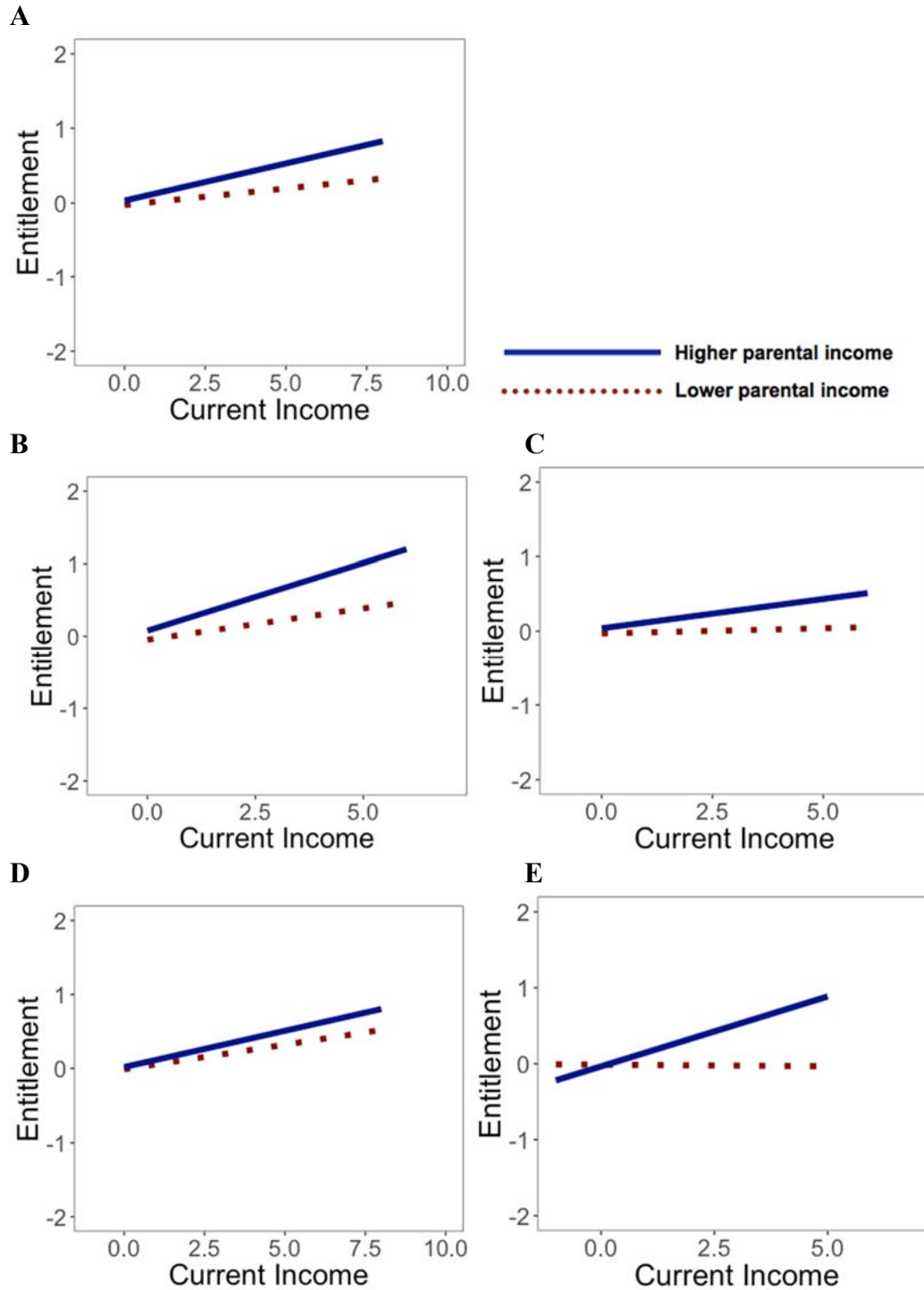


Figure 2. Interaction between current income and parental income predicting entitlement.

Results aggregating data from the four studies appear in panel A. Results for Samples 1-4 appear in panels B-E, respectively.

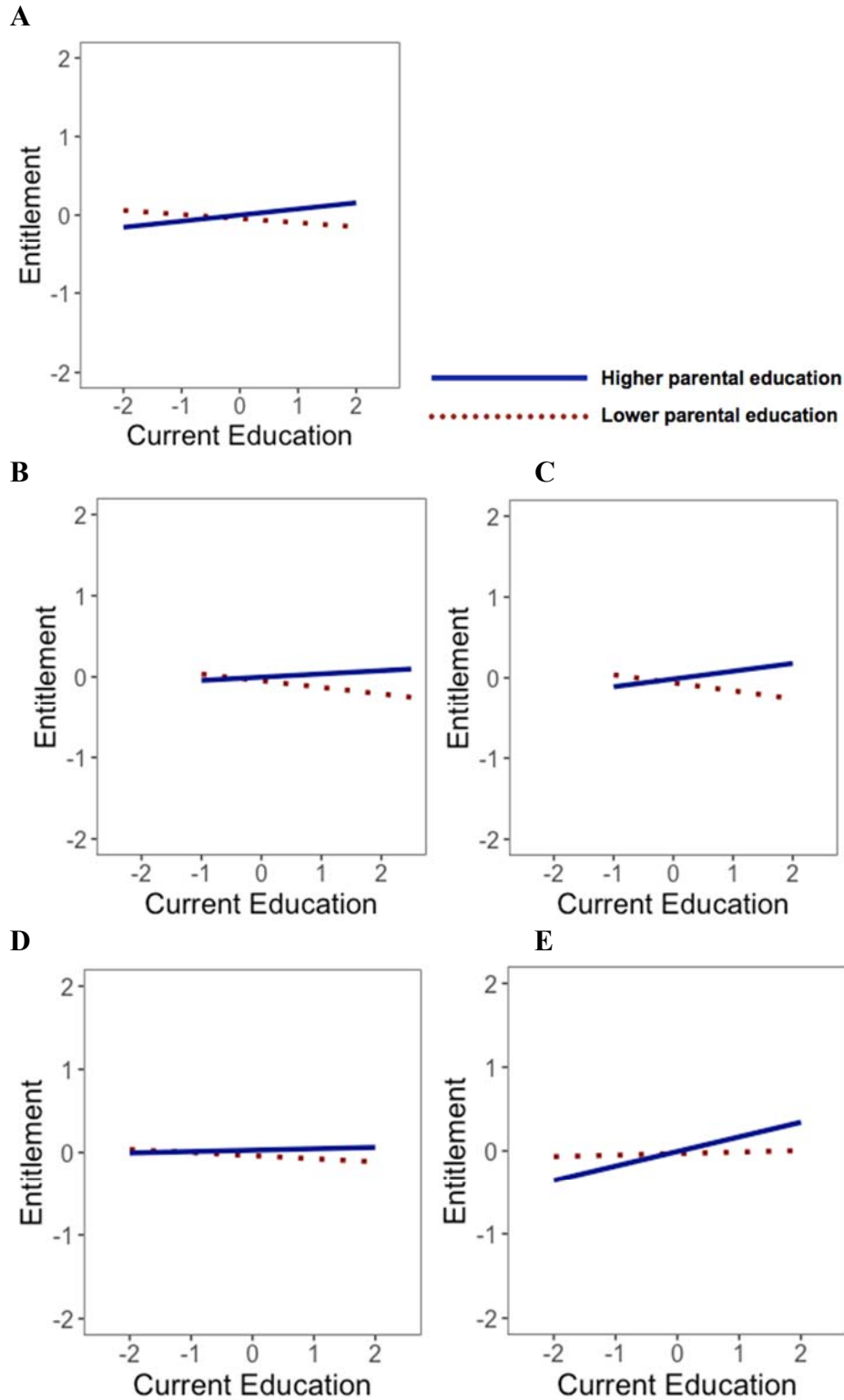


Figure 3. Interaction between current education and parental education predicting entitlement.

Results aggregating data from the four studies appear in panel A. Results for Samples 1-4 appear in panels B-E, respectively.

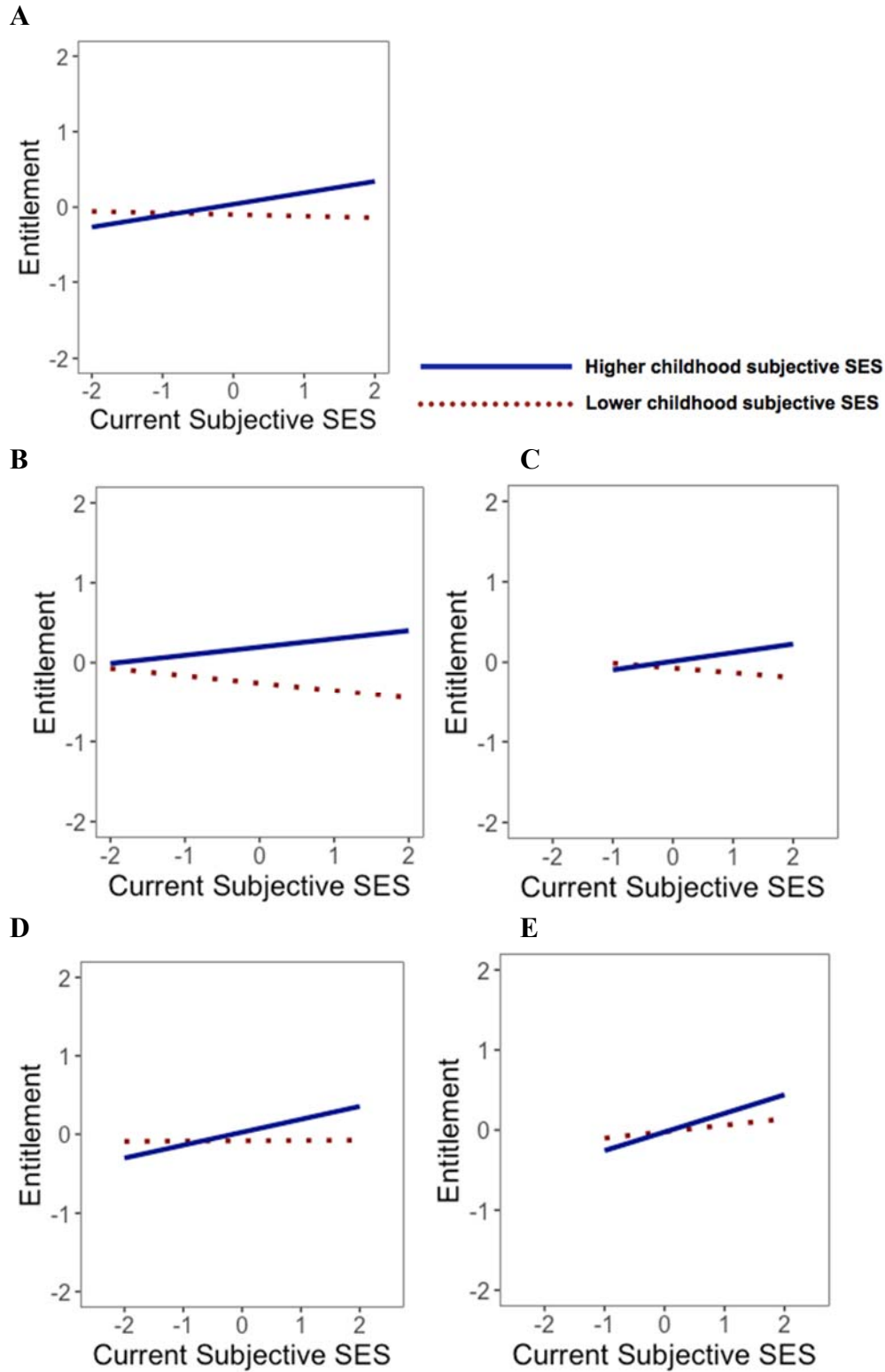


Figure 4. Interaction between current subjective SES and childhood subjective SES predicting entitlement. Results aggregating data from the four studies appear in panel A. Results for Samples 1-4 appear in panels B-E, respectively.

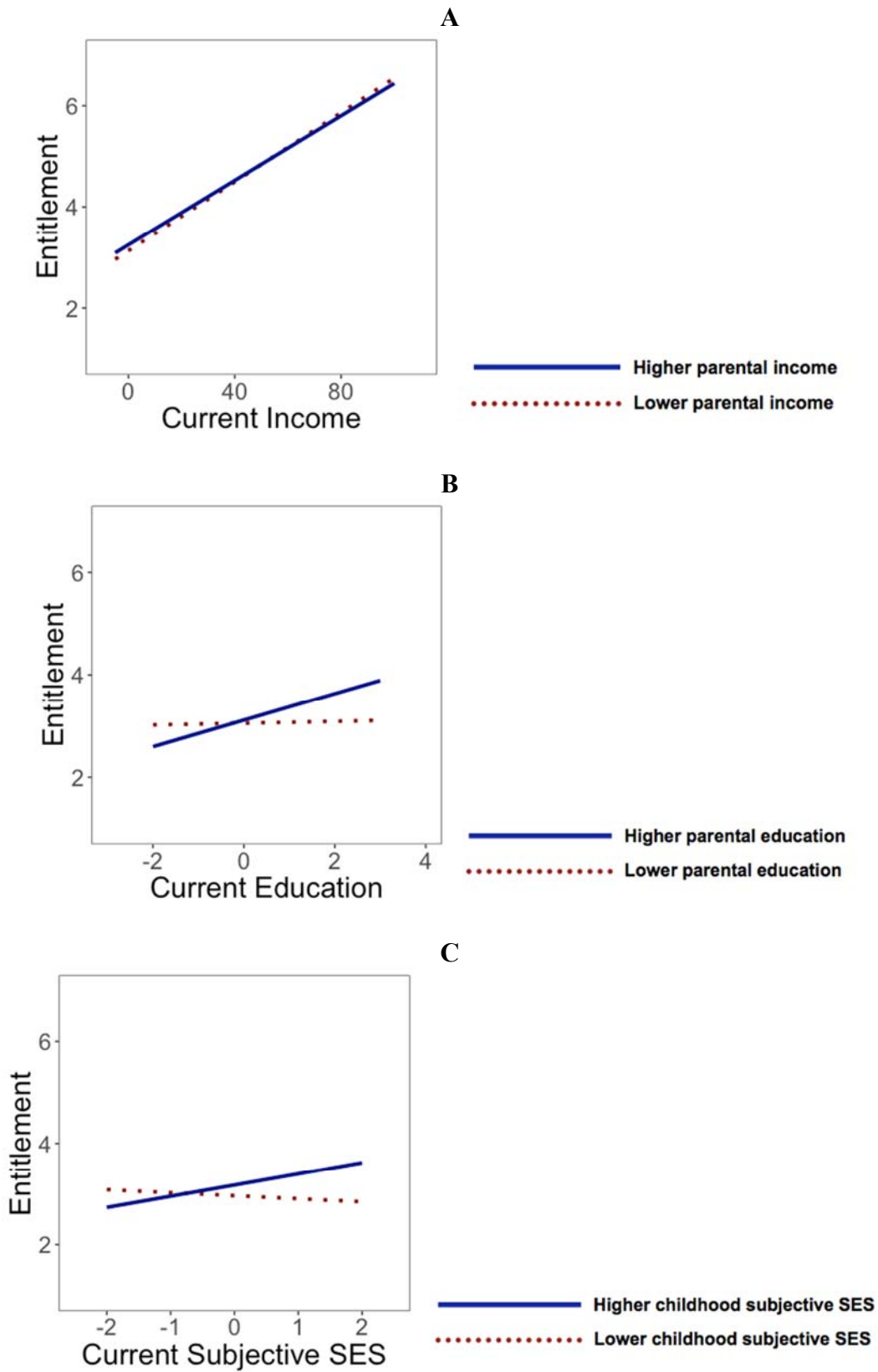


Figure 5. Interaction between current SES and childhood SES predicting entitlement in the confirmatory study.