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Eight- to 12-year-old US children's emerging subjective social status identity and intergroup attitudes

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Abstract

Drawing on social identity development theory, this study investigated a socioeconomically diverse sample of 8- to 12-year-old US children's (N = 93) subjective social status (SSS), how they determined and identified with their SSS, and whether their own SSS related to their social preferences for individuals from other SSS groups. Children primarily referenced material resources, lifestyles, money, and relative comparisons when explaining how they determined their SSS. Although all children identified with their SSS ingroup and viewed it positively, higher-SSS children reported stronger identification with their SSS ingroup than did middle-SSS children. Finally, regardless of their own SSS, children liked higher-SSS individuals less, on average, than middle- or lower-SSS individuals. Overall, this study provides novel evidence for the emergence of SSS identity in late childhood and its early relations to SSS intergroup preferences.

KEYWORDS
intergroup preferences, social identity development theory, subjective social status

1 | INTRODUCTION

The increasing wealth gap in the United States has led to more salient divides between individuals from different economic groups (Pew Research Center, 2020). Although US children have early emerging beliefs about what it means to belong to different economic groups (Sigelman, 2012) and begin to recognize broader economic inequalities by late childhood (Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021), developmental scientists have only recently begun to investigate children's

perceptions of their own position within the economic hierarchy (Ruck et al., 2019). Evidence to date indicates that children have a sense of their subjective social status (SSS) by early adolescence (Mistry et al., 2015), yet little is known about the extent to which children identify *with* their SSS nor *how* they determine it. Furthermore, although research has shown changes in social preferences for peers of different wealth backgrounds throughout childhood (Elenbaas et al., 2022), less is known about the role of children's own SSS in shaping those social preferences. Late childhood is a crucial time in which children's group identity awareness is developing and their intergroup preferences are in flux (Nesdale, 2017). To address these questions about the emergence of SSS identity and attitudes during late childhood, the current study drew on social identity development theory to investigate 8- to 12-year-old US children's SSS identity, how they determine their SSS, and how their own SSS relates to their social preferences for people from other SSS groups.

SSS is an individual's construal of their socioeconomic standing or "place" in society relative to others considering multiple (e.g., income, occupation, education, lifestyles, comparisons) indicators (Adler et al., 2000; Diemer et al., 2013). These *perceptions* of socioeconomic standing are linked to a variety of academic, health, and well-being outcomes throughout the lifespan (Adler et al., 2000; Destin et al., 2012). Moreover, divisive stereotypes about SSS groups perpetuate wealth inequality (Durante & Fiske, 2017) and emerge early in development (Shutts et al., 2016). Thus, SSS group identity has important implications for intra- and inter-personal experiences in childhood and throughout development.

1.1 | Social identity development theory and subjective social status

Research in developmental and social psychology has begun to investigate SSS as an *identity* to understand the meaning that individuals place on their SSS and how it shapes their perceptions and experiences (Destin & Debrosse, 2017). The boundaries between SSS groups are not distinct and rely on social comparisons to, for example, what others have (e.g., material possessions) and how others live (e.g., the social contexts one can access). To investigate how children form and identify with this social group identity, the current study adopted a social identity development theory perspective (SIDT; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001).

SIDT posits that children are motivated to find acceptance and belonging in the social group(s) that they share similarities with (i.e., their ingroup; Nesdale, 2017). Prior research indicates that children's awareness of their group membership often emerges around the age of five, typically leading to ingroup preference and around the age of seven and potentially including outgroup dislike in instances of high group commitment, perceived threat, or inequality (Nesdale & Brown, 2004). Furthermore, children are often motivated to identify with higher-status groups, which are groups that are viewed as the most positive or most desirable groups to belong to (for a range of reasons) in a given context (Nesdale, 2017). Once members of those higher-status groups, children's ingroup preference is greater than that of children in lower-status groups (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001).

Given the hierarchical structure of SSS, a SIDT approach would predict that children seek to identify as higher in SSS, as this group is perceived to have greater access to resources and is often socially preferred over lower-SSS peers (Shutts et al., 2016). Yet, research to date suggests that older children, adolescents, and adults alike often identify themselves as middle-SSS, even if their objective SES would suggest otherwise (Destin & Debrosse, 2017; Goodman et al., 2000; Mistry et al., 2015). Moreover, this "middle" group is often described as "normal" (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) and associated with positive traits such as "good" or "polite" (Mistry et al., 2015). Importantly, there is no evidence that individuals over-identify as *lower* in SSS at any point in the lifespan (Mistry et al., 2021). In fact, in studies on SSS identity with children, the lower end of the SSS spectrum is often unutilized (e.g., Kostet et al., 2022; Mistry et al., 2015).

Thus, although research suggests that children begin to develop an understanding of their SSS by late childhood (ages 10–12 years; Mistry et al., 2015), few studies have assessed *how* they determine their SSS, and no research to date has assessed the extent to which children at this age identify *with* (i.e., like, feel similar to, and belong to) their SSS group, an important part of identity development from an SIDT perspective. Finally, children hold social

preferences based on SSS (Shutts et al., 2016), but from a SIDT perspective, it is important to understand how their *own* SSS membership relates to those preferences (e.g., potential ingroup biases).

1.2 | Children's perceptions of their subjective social status

Prior research suggests a developmental shift in children's own SSS perceptions around late childhood. In general, young children tend to over-inflate their SSS, viewing themselves to be much higher than they may actually be (Amir et al., 2019; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022). For example, Mandalaywala et al. (2020) investigated US 4- to 7-year-olds' SSS using a rope task in which the top represented children with many resources and lots of social capital and the bottom represented children with few resources and little social capital. On average, 4- to 7-year-olds placed themselves towards the top of the rope, reflecting this "ceiling effect." However, by the age of 10, children's estimates of their SSS often shift towards the middle of the scale (Amir et al., 2019; Peretz-Lange, 2022). There are multiple potential explanations for this including strengthening correlations between perceived SSS and parent-reported SES, increasing motivation to identify in the SSS range that is perceived as "normal," or both (Goodman et al., 2015; Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022).

For example, focusing on late childhood, Mistry et al. (2015) introduced US 10- to 12-year-olds to a 10-rung ladder with the top representing "people who have the most money" and the bottom representing "people who have the least money." Children were asked to place themselves on a rung and explain why they thought they and their family would be on that rung. Peretz-Lange et al. (2022) used a similar design with children ages 4 to 10. In both studies, children often referenced the material resources that they possessed, the kinds of jobs their parents had, and how much money their family had saved (Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022). Other aspects of SSS, such as lifestyles afforded and social comparisons, were also common (Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022).

Although children often made these references to resources, jobs, money, and lifestyles in relation to their friends and families, children's observations and experiences in other social contexts such as their school, neighborhood, and the media may also serve as important sources of information for their SSS identity development. For example, potential exposure to individuals from similar and different SSS backgrounds in these contexts (de Veirman et al., 2019; White et al., 2013) may elicit comparisons between children's own lifestyle and that of their classmates at school that contribute to their developing sense of their SSS identity. The current study builds upon prior work by asking children to reflect on their experiences across five contexts in order assess the concepts that children reference (e.g., education, resources) as they make sense of their own SSS.

1.3 | Subjective social status biases

From a SIDT perspective, children's identification of the group that they belong to (i.e., self-categorization into their ingroup) typically leads to a general preference *for* their ingroup (Nesdale, 2017). For example, there is some evidence that young children, particularly those of higher SSS, choose to befriend peers who share their SSS background (Weigner, 2000). Likewise, children placed in an experimentally assigned higher-SSS group tend to prefer their ingroup (Horowitz et al., 2014).

Yet, in late childhood, more ambivalent attitudes about group status emerge, complicating the picture (Nesdale, 2004). For example, although young children in the United States often demonstrate greater preference for higher-SSS peers over lower-SSS peers (Ahl & Dunham, 2019; Shutts et al., 2016), these social preferences often shift in late childhood as children begin to expect higher-SSS individuals to be more exclusive and entitled and lower-SSS individuals to be more kind and generous (Burkholder et al., 2020; Elenbaas et al., 2022). Despite this shift, there is no evidence that older children begin to actively prefer lower-SSS peers. In fact, some evidence suggests that positive stereotypes about lower-SSS groups (e.g., resilient) may be due to assumptions about their perceived disadvantage

and hardships (Gönül, 2020, with children in Turkey). Although little research has investigated children's social preferences for middle-SSS group peers, some work suggests this group is viewed positively (Mistry et al., 2015). Taken together, it is known that children, particularly when higher-status, generally prefer their ingroup, but it has yet to be directly investigated how children's own SSS relates to their social preferences for people from other SSS groups.

1.4 | Developmental considerations

Overall, prior research points to both increasing correspondence between perceived SSS and objective socioeconomic status (SES) in late childhood (Peretz-Lange et al., 2022) as well as increasing ambivalence in children's attitudes toward SSS groups (Burkholder et al., 2020). From an SIDT perspective, this makes late childhood (around age 8–12 years) an especially interesting point for emerging SSS identity and intergroup attitudes. Moreover, children are part of multiple ingroups (e.g., race, gender) in addition to SSS, and by late childhood, begin to explore how and why they belong to different social groups (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Finally, late childhood marks important changes in children's broader social contexts that may influence the development of their SSS identity. Although families are still influential, peers become an increasing source of socialization during this time (Collins et al., 2002) and many children in the United States move to middle schools that are often more socioeconomically diverse than their elementary schools (Anderson et al., 2000). Likewise, exposure to digital media increases throughout late childhood (Livingstone et al., 2017). Thus, late childhood may be a key point in development to investigate how children come to determine their SSS and develop their SSS intergroup attitudes.

1.5 | Overview of current study

To investigate how US children in late childhood conceptualize their SSS identity and how it relates to social preferences for individuals of similar and different SSS backgrounds, the current study posed three primary research questions framed by SIDT (Nesdale, 2004):

1. To what extent do children identify with their SSS?
2. How do children construct an understanding of their SSS?
3. How does children's SSS group shape their intergroup preferences?

To address these research questions, children first indicated their SSS using a modified version of the MacArthur Scale of SSS and reported their feelings of liking, similarity, and belonging with their SSS. Next, children answered open-ended questions probing how they determined their SSS. Finally, children indicated how much they liked or disliked other people who were higher-, middle-, or lower-SSS.

2 | HYPOTHESES

2.1 | To what extent do children identify with their SSS?

Consistent with SIDT and prior research (Mistry et al., 2021), we predicted that children who perceived themselves to be middle- and higher-SSS would identify more strongly with their SSS (i.e., report stronger feelings of liking, similarity, and belonging) than children to perceived themselves to be lower-SSS.

2.2 | How do children construct an understanding of their SSS?

Drawing on prior research (e.g., Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022), we predicted that children's estimates of their SSS would be positively correlated with their family's SES (parent income and education). To better understand how children construct their sense of their SSS, we probed five different contexts in children's lives (e.g., family, school, media) to investigate the extent to which children referenced six key concepts (e.g., money, jobs, education, resources, comparisons, lifestyles) when explaining how they determined their SSS, and whether references to these six concepts differed by context, SSS, and age.

2.3 | How does children's own SSS shape their intergroup preferences?

Guided by SIDT, we predicted that children would, overall, report stronger social preferences for peers who shared their SSS (i.e., ingroup members) than for peers who did not share their SSS. However, drawing on research highlighting stronger ingroup biases among individuals in higher-status groups (Burkholder et al., 2020) and a tendency to over-identify as a part of the middle-SSS group throughout development (e.g., Mistry et al., 2015), we also predicted that children identifying as middle- and higher-SSS would demonstrate stronger ingroup preferences than children identifying as lower-SSS.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants

Participants were $N = 93$ children ages 8–12 years ($M = 9.83$ years, $SD = 1.37$ years) living in a mid-sized city in the Northeastern United States. Participants were recruited from community sites (e.g., parks, libraries) in 2021–2022. A target sample size of $N = 50$ with full SES demographics was determined using a priori power analyses in G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) anticipating effect sizes of $r = .23$ for the SSS–SES correlation (Mistry et al., 2015) and $\eta_p^2 = .04$ on associations between SSS identity and preferences (McGuire et al., 2019, Nesdale et al., 2005), with α at .05 and power at .80. The final N exceeds the necessary N due to missing SES information for some participants, and because not all participants completed all measures. Participant demographic information was obtained via parent report as part of the consent process and included parent education, family income, child age, race/ethnicity, and gender (see Table 1).

3.2 | Procedure

This study was approved by the institutional review board at the University of Rochester. Participants in the target age range at each site were invited to participate by study team members, parent permission and child assent were obtained, and participants were individually interviewed for approximately 10 min by research assistants at the recruitment sites. Research assistants were graduate and undergraduate students from diverse racial, gender, and SES backgrounds who all went through several weeks of internal training before interviewing participants and received continuous feedback from the study lead throughout data collection and processing. Materials included a PowerPoint slideshow to display the questions and paper data collection sheets. All interview sessions were recorded via

TABLE 1 Sample demographics.

	%	Range	*M*	*SD*
Child age in years		8–12	9.83	1.37
8	20.4			
9	25.8			
10	20.4			
11	17.2			
12	16.1			
Child gender				
Boy	41.9			
Girl	47.3			
Not reported	7.5			
Child race/Ethnicity				
White	39.8			
Black	14			
Asian	2.2			
Latino/a	12.9			
Native American	1.1			
Other	5.4			
Multiracial/ethnic	11.8			
Not Reported	12.9			
Child subjective social status		3–10	6.12	1.53
1	0			
2	0			
3	1.1			
4	6.5			
5	33.3			
6	26.9			
7	19.4			
8	3.2			
9	3.2			
10	6.5			
Family household income		2–13	6.54	2.37
(1) <$10k	0			
(2) $10k–15k	4.3			
(3) $15k–25k	2.2			
(4) $25k–35k	3.2			
(5) $35k–50k	19.4			
(6) $50k–75k	12.9			
(7) $75k–100k	9.7			

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	%	Range	*M*	*SD*
(8) $100k–150k	6.5			
(9) $150k–200k	6.5			
(10) $200k–250k	7.5			
(11) $250k–300k	1.2			
(12) >$300k	2.2			
(13) Not reported	18.3			
Parent education level		1–7	4.57	1.47
(1) Did not graduate high school	4.3			
(2) High school graduate	4.3			
(3) Some college	11.8			
(4) Associates	14			
(5) Bachelors	21.5			
(6) Graduate	30.1			
(7) Not reported	8.6			
Spouse or partner education level		1–7	4.45	1.55
(1) Did not graduate high school	4.3			
(2) High school graduate	4.3			
(3) Some college	6.5			
(4) Associates	9.7			
(5) Bachelors	17.2			
(6) Graduate	19.4			
(7) Not reported	41.9			

Sony Digital Audio Recording devices and later transcribed. Participants were first asked SSS identity and explanation questions, followed by group preference questions.

3.3 | Measures

3.3.1 | Child subjective social status identity

Participants' SSS was measured using a modified version of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Mistry et al., 2015). Participants were introduced to a moveable star icon and a 10-rung ladder. The interviewer read: "Imagine that this ladder pictures how [the city where you live] is set up. At the top are the people with the most money and at the bottom are the people with the least money. Now think about you and your family. Where do you think you and your family would be on this ladder? Drag the star to the step where you and your family would be on this ladder." The location of the star icon was coded from 1 = the bottom rung of the ladder to 10 = the top rung of the ladder.

Next, participants were asked three questions regarding the extent to which they identified with their SSS. Participants indicated how much they liked being on their indicated step of the ladder (1 = really dislike to 6 = really like),

TABLE 2 Coding scheme definitions and examples.

Code	Definition	Examples
Money	References to money, spending, saving, costs, investments	"Well I know my dad gets a pretty good amount of money"
Jobs	References to jobs, work	"Mama has 3 or 2 jobs…"
Education	References to education access, quality, value; beyond the form of schooling	"…it's a good school for us, so I think that it's good"
Resources	References to physical items and assets specific to the child or what the context provides	"…I do have electronics and stuff…like a tablet or like a laptop…so like a lot of smart devices"
Rank	References to comparisons situating one relative to others	"…We're just kind of in the middle, we're not rich, we're not poor, we're just in between"
Lifestyle	References to ways of living, routines, beliefs, behaviors, opportunities	"…There's a lot of rules. Like you have to have your trash a certain way, you have to have your leaves in the front of the yard at a certain time, people randomly plow your driveway"
Other	Unable to assign	"Umm, skip this question"

similarity to other kids on that step of the ladder (1 = really not similar to 6 = really similar), and their feelings of belonging on that step of the ladder (1 = really do not belong to 6 = really belong).

3.3.2 | Explaining subjective social status

Participants were asked five open-ended questions regarding how they determined their SSS placement. Responses were coded for references to six conceptual categories (see below). Each question probed a different context: "You said you were on step [X] of the ladder. What have you seen, heard, or experienced with [your friends]/[your family]/[at school]/[in your neighborhood where you live]/[in the media in your life] that helps you to know that?" Interviewers followed up as appropriate (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?"; "And how does that help you to know you're on step [X]?").

The conceptual coding system was designed to reflect the previously-reviewed indicators of SSS: money, jobs, education, resources, rank, and lifestyle (Elenbaas et al., 2022; Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022). See Table 2 for definitions and examples. Each response was coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of each concept (e.g., does this response reference jobs (1) or not (0)?) Thus, responses could receive multiple codes. Responses not fitting any of the six conceptual categories were coded "other." Coding was conducted by one of the authors and a graduate research assistant unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study. To ensure objectivity, coders were blind to participants' reported SSS, age, and the context being coded. Inter-coder reliability based on 25% of the sample responses was high: money ($\kappa = .97$), jobs ($\kappa = .82$), education ($\kappa = .85$), resources ($\kappa = .88$), rank ($\kappa = .78$), lifestyle ($\kappa = .85$), and other ($\kappa = .95$).

3.3.3 | Subjective social status intergroup preferences

Participants were re-introduced to the 10-rung ladder and reminded of what it represents. Then they were asked to *only* think about kids on the top two steps of the ladder (i.e., kids with the most money) and report how much they liked those kids (1 = really dislike, 6 = really like). This was repeated for kids on the middle two (i.e., kids with a medium amount of money) and bottom two (i.e., kids with the least amount of money) steps. The top, middle, and bottom were

used to represent the extremes of SSS groups, without ascribing labels (e.g., rich, poor). The questions asked about "kids" in general with those group memberships rather than specific peers that the participants personally knew (e.g., "the kid in your class with the most money").

3.3.4 | Parent socioeconomic status

Measures of family SES were collected via parent report of educational attainment for themselves and their spouse or partner (if applicable) and approximate annual household income (see Table 1). Education was reported on a scale from 1 = less than high school degree to 6 = graduate degree. 60% of families reported earning a bachelor's degree or higher. Family income was reported on a scale from 1 = less than $10K to 12 = more than $300K. The sample income ranged from $10k to > $300k and the median was $50k−$75k, which is slightly higher than the median household income bracket for the area where these data were collected ($35k–$50k; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

3.3.5 | Data analytic plan

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 28. To test our hypotheses, participants' SSS scale placements were categorized into three groups: lower-SSS (1–4), middle-SSS (5–6), and higher-SSS (7–10). Age was split between younger (8 and 9 year olds) and older (10, 11, and 12 year olds) children for comparison with prior studies (e.g., Mistry et al., 2015). Repeated measures ANOVAs were used to test hypotheses regarding whether participants' identification with and intergroup preferences towards SSS groups differed based on their own SSS (higher, middle, or lower). Partial eta squared (η_p^2) are provided as effect sizes. Standard errors (SEs) are provided as indices of point estimate precision. Follow-up comparisons were conducted with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Correlations were used to test hypothesis about associations between participants' SSS and family SES. Chi-square tests were used to examine whether references to six key concepts underlying SSS differed by context, age (younger, older), and SSS (higher, middle, lower).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Descriptives

Participants' SSS placements ranged from 3 to 10 (see Table 1). The average SSS was 6.12 (SD = 1.53). Seven (7.5%) participants fell within the "lower-SSS" group, 56 (60.2%) within the "middle-SSS" group, and 30 (32.3%) in the "higher-SSS" group. Descriptives and correlations among all study variables are displayed in Table 3.

4.2 | Subjective social status identification

Overall, participants from all SSS groups indicated liking, feeling similar to, and belonging to their respective SSS ingroup. As illustrated in Figure 1, participants' degree of identification also differed across SSS groups, $F(4, 180) = 3.71$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Specifically, higher-SSS participants indicated significantly greater belonging than middle-SSS participants, $p = .01$. There were no significant differences in liking or similarity across SSS groups, all $ps > .05$. Thus, our hypothesis was partially supported; participants generally felt positively about their SSS group but those identifying as higher-SSS reported greater feelings of belonging.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables.

	n	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Child subjective social status	93	6.12	1.53										
Demographic information													
2. Child age	93	9.83	1.37	−.20*									
3. Family income	70	6.54	2.37	−.16	.02								
4. Parent education	80	4.57	1.47	−.18	.02	.60***							
5. Spouse or partner education	57	4.45	1.55	−.11	−.10	.56***	.55***						
Identity measures													
6. Like	93	4.90	.84	.24*	−.19	.11	.08	.05					
7. Similar	93	4.16	1.03	−.11	.22*	.05	.07	−.18	.18				
8. Belong	93	4.70	.84	.13	−.14	−.08	.05	−.21	.33**	.07			
Intergroup preference													
9. Like top two	92	3.99	1.17	.07	−.10	−.13	−.11	−.19	.27*	.33**	.12		
10. Like middle two	91	5.01	.77	−.22*	−.04	.02	.14	.03	.14	.03	.23*	.21*	.06
11. Like bottom two	91	4.78	1.11	−.16	.01	−.25*	−.12	−.27*	.04	.13	.08	.07	.16

Note: Child age ranged from 8 to 12 years. Child SSS ranged from 3 to 10. Parent income ranged from $10k–15k to >$300k. Parent and spouse education ranged from Did Not Graduate High School to Graduate Degree. Like, similar, and belong ranged from 1 to 6. Like Top Two ranged from 1 to 6. Like Middle Two ranged from 3 to 6. Like Bottom Two ranged from 1 to 6.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

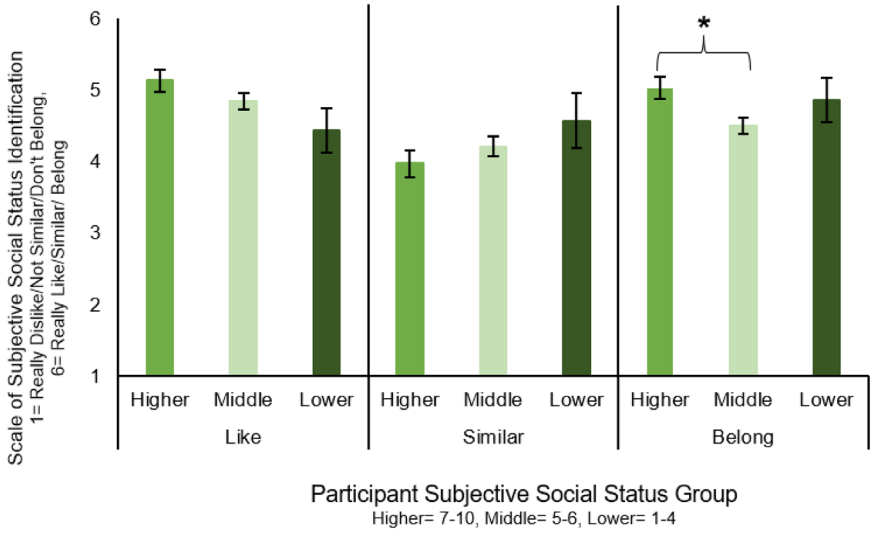

FIGURE 1 Subjective social status identification across subjective social status groups. *$p < .05$.

4.3 | Determining subjective social status: family socioeconomic status

Our second hypothesis was not supported. There were no significant correlations between participants' SSS and parent-reported SES; parent education $r = -.18$, $p = .11$; parent's spouse/partner education $r = -.11$, $p = .40$; family

income $r = -.16$ $p = .19$. To further explore this surprising finding, child age was correlated with SSS to investigate potential age-related differences. Replicating prior work (Amir et al., 2019; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022), participants' SSS was significantly negatively correlated with their age, $r = -.20$, $p = .05$.

4.4 | Determining subjective social status: explanations

4.4.1 | Explanation frequency

To investigate children's self-reports of how they determined their SSS (i.e., "what have you seen, heard, or experienced […] that helps you know that?"), we first examined the frequency of six conceptual codes across all five contexts. Overall, 71.6% of responses were codable and 28.4% of responses were coded as "Other" (e.g., "I don't know"). Of all codable responses, 70% referred two or more concepts.

Participants most frequently referenced resources (43.6%), including references to material items and assets (e.g., "a few of our recess supplies are usually like losing air, like some of the basketballs"). This code frequently appeared alongside other references. For instance, one participant compared themselves in terms of resources, money, and jobs to their friends: "Well, uh, some of my friends have lots of the same things as me and they are… they kind of make a lot of money in their family. […] Like some technology, some different toys and outdoor playing stuff like footballs, basketballs, baseballs. We have pools. […] Um because some of my friends have like… their parents are doctors, one of my friends' parents owns a hotel." (Codes: money, jobs, resources, rank; SSS = 10).

References to lifestyle (39.7%), including ways of living, routines, and opportunities, was the second most frequently referenced code (e.g., "We've been on lots of vacations"). In combination with other concepts, one participant described the routines within their household: "Chore money probably. People who have less probably don't get chore money and people who are richer get way more chore money than me and they don't do as much… take out the trash, do the laundry, clean. […] Like things they buy for us… they don't like spoil us. But they like, they don't spoil us too much but they don't give us too less. Like they make us pay for some stuff but not like towels or toothbrush and toothpaste but we do have to pay for our Xbox and our Switch." (Codes: money, resources, rank, lifestyle; SSS = 5).

References to money (32.2%) appeared both in relation to the participant themselves (e.g., "I have the most money at [school] but our school is not that expensive") and in relation to social contexts in general. For example, one participant described their neighborhood: "All the houses are like the same in the neighborhood, not exactly identical, but like the same build kind of, they're all one story and they're all like, you know. I mean like some of the houses there's paint chips and stuff and there's definitely some houses in the neighborhood that are like nicer than the others, like they have plants in their yard, they have like a wreath, which like show that they care more about their house or they have the money or whatever to be able to get those things. But I guess cars also shows but I don't really pay attention to cars so I don't really know like how expensive it is." (Codes: money, resources, rank, lifestyle; SSS = 5).

As suggested by the examples above, relative comparisons (i.e., rank, 30.2%) between the participant and those around them were also important to children's conceptualization of their SSS. As one participant put it: "I mean we're not really poor or really rich". References to rank also included references to similarities; for example, one child discussed this in terms of the media: "Well, I've seen, like, some people on social media who are super rich, and then other people who are on step 6 like my family is. And, um, I guess we're just like normal people and not the kind of people who like, spend their money for random things to make their houses more prettier." (Codes: money, rank, lifestyle; SSS = 6).

Overall, participants rarely referenced jobs or education. 4.2% of responses referenced the jobs participants' parents had (e.g., "my dad works for a pretty big business."). References to education (1.8%), including access to quality education or the value of education, was the least common (e.g., "My number one goal is to just walk the stage and get into college").

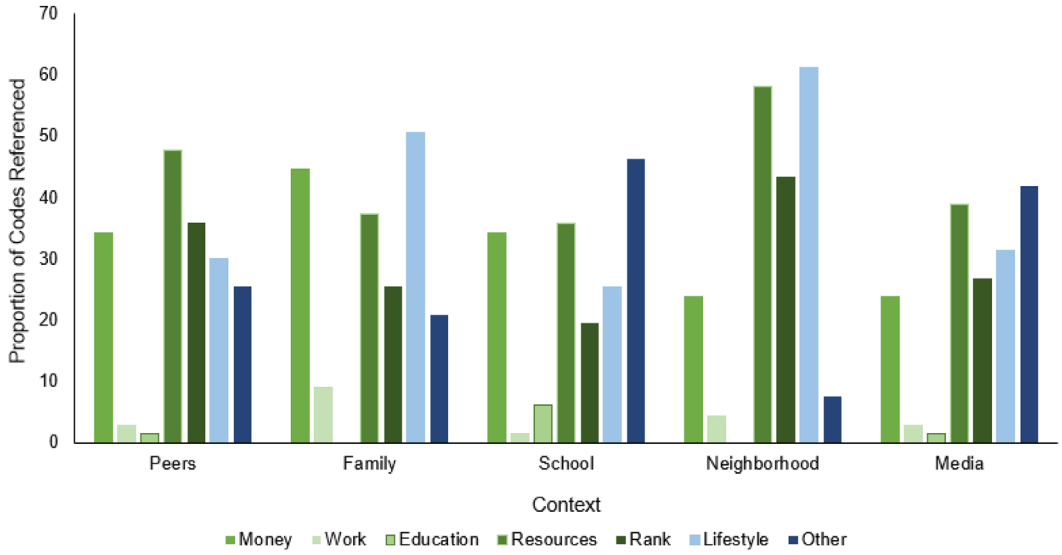

FIGURE 2 Subjective social status conceptual explanations across contexts.

4.4.2 | Explanations across context, subjective social status, and age

Next, we assessed whether references to concepts informing participants' SSS differed by context, SSS group, or age group. First, as illustrated in Figure 2, references to rank (χ^2 (2) = 15.15, p = .05) and lifestyle (χ^2 (2) = 31.20, p < .001) were more common in the neighborhood context and responses coded as other were more common in the school and media contexts (χ^2 (2) = 36.91, p < .001). Second, and there were no differences in references by participant SSS group, ps > .05

Third, there were significant differences based on age group. Depicted in Figure 3, older children (ages 10–12 years) were more likely to reference rank (χ^2 (2) = 28.17, p < .001), resources (χ^2 (2) = 10.12, p < .01), and jobs (χ^2 (2) = 6.93, p = .03), and marginally more likely to reference lifestyle (χ^2 (2) = 5.61, p = .06) than younger children (ages 8–9 years). Younger children were more likely than older children to give responses that were unable to be coded, χ^2 (2) = 7.91, p = .02.

4.4.3 | Subjective social status intergroup preferences

Participants on average liked peers from all SSS groups (see Figure 4). Participants' social preferences for SSS groups were not significantly related to their own SSS, F(4,176) = .968, p = .42, η_p^2 = .022; that is, we did not find evidence of ingroup biases. However, there was a significant main effect of *others'* SSS group, F(2,176) = 13.97, p < .011, η_p^2 = .136. As depicted in Figure 4, participants liked higher-SSS peers significantly less than middle-SSS and lower-SSS peers, both ps < .001. Thus, although our third hypothesis was not supported, these results revealed differences in participants' social preferences for SSS groups; higher-SSS peers were liked less than middle- and lower-SSS peers.

5 | DISCUSSION

Drawing on social identity development theory (SIDT), this study investigated the extent to which 8- to 12-year-old US children identified with their SSS, how they determined their SSS, and their social preferences for peers from different

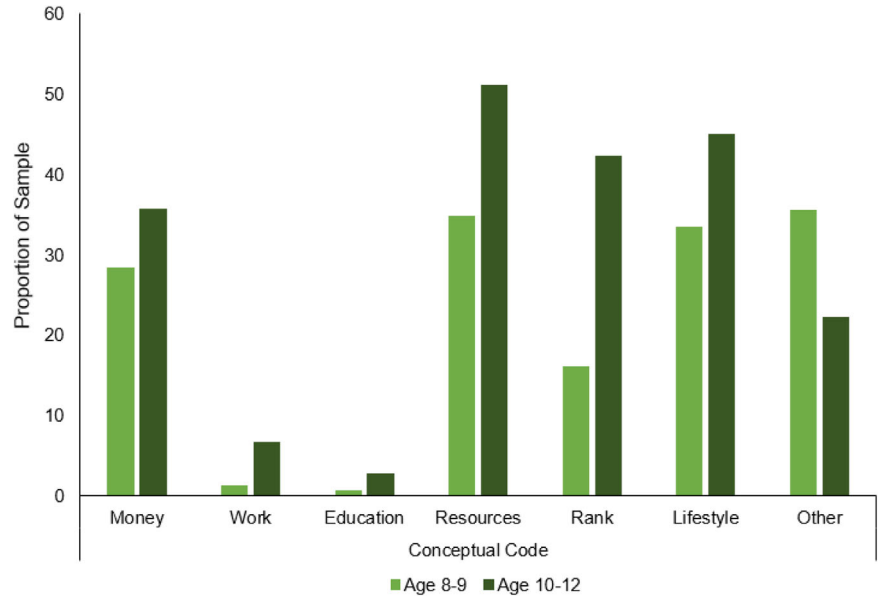

FIGURE 3 Subjective social status conceptual explanations across age groups.

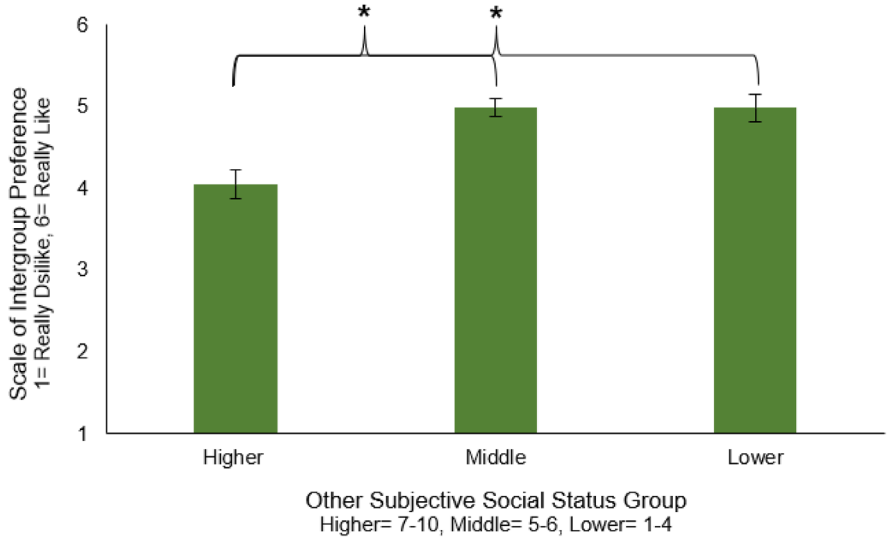

FIGURE 4 Subjective social status intergroup social preferences. *$p < .05$.

SSS backgrounds. The results revealed three important findings that contribute to the literature on the development of SSS identity and attitudes. First, children from all SSS groups identified *with* their SSS, reporting positive feelings of liking, similarity, and belonging, yet children identifying as higher-SSS indicated greater feelings of belonging compared to those identifying as middle- and lower-SSS. Second, between 8 and 12 years, children increasingly referenced resources, lifestyles, money, and comparisons to others when explaining how they determined their SSS, suggesting increasing nuance with age in the indices that children used to determine their SSS. Finally, regardless of their own SSS group, children indicated greater social preferences for middle- and lower-SSS peers than higher-SSS peers, pointing to the emergence of ambivalent attitudes about SSS groups in late childhood.

5.1 | Subjective social status identification

Consistent with prior research (Destin & Debrosse, 2017; Goodman et al., 2000; Mistry et al., 2015), most children (60%) in the current study placed themselves towards the middle of the SSS scale. From an SIDT perspective, this may reflect a tendency to identify with an SSS group that is generally positively perceived. Moreover, as predicted by SIDT, across groups children overall reported feelings of liking, similarity, and belonging with their SSS ingroup. This indicates that children broadly identified *with* their SSS ingroup, an important criterion for group identity development, regardless of which group they chose.

Interestingly, at this point in late childhood when SSS identity is just forming, children who indicated themselves to be higher-SSS (32%) reported greater belonging with their ingroup than children who identified as middle-SSS (but no differences emerged for liking or similarity). Prior SIDT experimental work has shown that when children are randomly assigned to differing-status groups, those of higher-status groups are less likely to choose to voluntarily leave their group (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001). Together with the finding that many children self-identified as middle-SSS, these results suggest that late childhood is a time when attitudes about SSS group status are changing and both middle- and higher-SSS groups have the potential to be perceived as desirable groups to belong to. Future research would benefit from further investigating SSS group desirability and the extent to which children identify with their SSS by exploring *why* they identify with their group.

5.2 | Explanations for subjective social status identity

When describing how they came to determine their SSS, children primarily referenced resources they have (e.g., "we both have things that some people don't have, and we both have toys") and the lifestyles they are afforded (e.g., "we're able to go to stuff like restaurants once in a while"). However, references to money (e.g., "my parents have been struggling a lot with money") and rank (e.g., "I'm not lower than 5 because obviously like I have electronics… and I know I'm not really, really high because like I know I'm not super rich or anything") were also frequent.

These findings extend prior research (Mistry et al., 2015, Peretz-Lange, 2022) to more precisely describe how US children conceptualize their SSS in late childhood. For instance, many children (70%) referenced more than one concept (e.g., both resources and rank), suggesting that SSS group identity is informed by multiple aspects of children's observations and experiences. Moreover, children readily described things they had seen, heard, or experienced with their friends, family, and in their neighborhood that contributed to their understanding of their SSS, however, they were less likely to generate examples from school or the media. These latter contexts may not be as informative to SSS for 8- to 12-year-olds, or they may do so in a more passive and unnoticeable way. Future research might benefit from asking about the more proximal contexts (friends, family, and neighborhood) to learn more about SSS identity construction.

Additionally, consistent with other recent studies (Amir et al., 2019, Peretz-Lange et al., 2022), children's SSS placements were negatively correlated with their age in this sample. Interestingly, older children were also more likely than younger children to reference resources, jobs, and rank, suggesting that purchasing power, employment status, and comparisons to others' SSS were increasingly salient between middle and late childhood. These findings may partially explain the age-related decreases in children's SSS estimates; younger children generally overestimated their SSS, but older children may have moved towards increased accuracy in part based on increased recognition of multiple determinants of SSS.

However, in contrast to prior work in late childhood (Mistry et al., 2015; Peretz-Lange et al., 2022), children's SSS placements were not significantly correlated with their family's SES in this sample. This may be related to the most common ways in which children determined their SSS, specifically, by drawing on their understanding of the material resources and lifestyle options available to them. In fact, resource and lifestyle cues can be manipulated

to obscure SSS perceptions. For example, one study found that mothers experiencing economic hardship reported buying their children nicer clothes, toys, and entertainment to convey a sense of stability (Mistry & Lowe, 2006). Although money was also among the most frequently referenced concepts in this study, children were rarely describing their families' *income*. Instead, they often referenced money in terms of purchasing power (e.g., "We have enough money to buy another house"). Overall, 8- to 12-year-old US children's emerging SSS identity may not be primarily based on SES indices such as jobs, education, or income, but rather the more social experiences and implications of SSS.

5.3 | Subjective social status intergroup attitudes

Interestingly, the current study did not find significant relations between children's own SSS group membership and their SSS intergroup attitudes. That is, counter to our hypotheses, we did not find SSS ingroup preference (or outgroup dislike) in this sample. From an SIDT perspective, the study did not incorporate conditions of threat or inequality (Nesdale & Brown, 2004), and therefore may not have tapped into a need for strong ingroup preference or outgroup dislike. We also used scale measures to assess preferences for lower-, middle-, and higher-SSS groups rather than a forced-choice design that might have uncovered ingroup preferences if children were constrained to prefer just one person. Another consideration is that late childhood may actually be too early to see SSS ingroup preferences, as SSS identity is clearly still forming during this period of development. Future research might experimentally manipulate conditions (e.g., degree of inequality) or use forced-choice as well as scale measures to determine whether SSS ingroup preference and/or outgroup dislike are present in late childhood when the context prompts it.

Although they did not have SSS *ingroup* preferences, children did have SSS group preferences. Specifically, they liked the higher-SSS group less than the middle- and lower-SSS groups, rating higher-SSS peers about neutrally and lower- and middle-SSS peers positively. This finding is similar to prior work showing increasing ambivalence toward higher-SSS peers (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2022) and a general positive attitude toward middle-SSS peers (e.g., Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) in late childhood. Findings of positivity towards lower-SSS peers are, however, harder to interpret because this group is also increasingly viewed ambivalently (e.g., as both unintelligent and kind; Durante & Fiske, 2017, Sigelman, 2012) in late childhood. One possibility is that assumptions about warmth took precedence in this context, as there is also emerging evidence that children may perceive that, because of their lack of material resources, lower-SSS individuals *must* be friendly to get by (Gönül, 2020). To examine these multiple possibilities, future research should investigate *why* children in late childhood report liking or disliking different SSS groups.

5.4 | Limitations and future directions

There are five main limitations to this study that also reflect important directions for future research. First, despite having a socioeconomically diverse sample, only 7.5% of participants personally identified as lower-SSS, so conclusions drawn about this group are restricted. Future work should seek to specifically investigate the experiences of lower-SSS individuals.

Second, despite overall sample diversity in race and ethnicity, certain groups were underrepresented. Prior work has identified some important distinctions in SSS perceptions across racial and ethnic groups in the United States. For example, US adolescents from racial-ethnic minority groups, particularly when also low-income, are more likely to overestimate their SSS position relative to SES indices than are White adolescents from the same SES background (Goodman et al., 2015). Likewise, income is a stronger predictor of SSS for White adults than for Black or Latinx adults (Wolff et al., 2010). One interpretation pertains to differences in the proximity of the referent group. For example, Brown et al. (2008) studied a sample of Appalachian youth, either White or Cherokee, finding that, despite actually living in lower levels of poverty, White youth placed themselves *lower* in SSS than their Cherokee

peers. It was speculated that due to the social enclave of Cherokee individuals living on a reservation, their point of comparison was more proximal, in contrast, White youth were comparing themselves with other White youth nationwide (Brown et al., 2008). Although we were unable to explore SSS x race-ethnicity interactions with our sample, an important future direction for research in this area is to further investigate similarities and differences in how, via what experiences, and in what contexts children from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds determine their SSS.

Third, although the current study had family measures of SES to compare with children's SSS placements, we did not measure SES indicators in other contexts, such as the resources available at school or neighborhood average income. As one example, Peretz-Lange et al. (2022) compared the extent to which children under- or over-estimated their SSS relative to the economic conditions of their neighborhood. This method should be considered moving forward to better understand children's SSS perceptions beyond their immediate household context.

Fourth, most research on children's SSS is cross-sectional and little is known regarding how SSS identity and attitudes change over time (e.g., Goodman et al., 2015). On a closely related note, our measures asked children to directly reflect on how they determined their SSS (i.e., "what have you seen, heard, or experienced […] that helps you know to know that?") Overall, 10- to 12-year-olds were more likely than 8- to 9-year-olds to reference rank, resources, and jobs. We interpret this as an indication of developmental changes in the extent to which children recognize relative comparisons, purchasing power, and employment circumstances as determinants of SSS, however, there are two possible alternative interpretations. Younger children may actually take note of rank, resources, and jobs, just like older children do, but unlike older children, younger children may lack either the cognitive capacity to incorporate these specific concepts into their understanding of their SSS or the metacognitive capacity to later reflect on how they inform their SSS. Future studies should use multiple measures, including both explicit and indirect questions, for a robust assessment of developmental continuity and change in SSS identity across late childhood and into adolescence.

Fifth, it is important to acknowledge an ongoing conceptual question in this area of research, namely, do children represent their SSS identity as a category or as a spectrum? More research is needed, however, the extant literature points to a little bit of both. For example, on the one hand, children use labels such as "middle class," "rich," or "poor" to describe themselves and others and expect this group membership to be passed from parent to child, suggesting social categories (Dickinson et al., 2023; Heberle & Carter, 2015; Mistry et al., 2021). On the other hand, children use relative comparisons (e.g., "more money") to describe their own and others' "place" and believe forms of social mobility enable people to change their "place," suggesting a spectrum (Dickinson et al., 2022; Heberle & Carter, 2015; Mistry et al., 2021). Adding to the complexity, all of these attitudes and beliefs undergo developmental change and are contextually variable. Finally, a challenge to answering these representational questions lies in a general current misalignment between theory and methods in this area. Specifically, the most widely used theories of how children make meaning of social identities, including SIDT, assume a categorical perspective. By contrast, the most widely used measures of this particular identity in childhood, including the MacArthur Scale of SSS, assume a spectrum perspective. Although the theoretical and methodological choices we made for the current study were the most appropriate means available to address our research questions, we hope that futures studies can build on our findings, pushing theoretical and methodological boundaries for a more complete model of children's developing SSS identity and attitudes.

In conclusion, this study provided new evidence on the extent to which US 8- to 12-year-olds identify with their SSS group, how they determine their SSS, and their social preferences towards other SSS groups. Children overall identified with their SSS ingroup, and this was particularly true for children who identified as higher-SSS. Children primarily determined their SSS based on what they have, what they do, and how that compares to others around them. Finally, regardless of their own SSS, children preferred middle- and lower-SSS peers over higher-SSS peers. These findings contribute to developmental scientists' growing understanding of SSS in late childhood and point to important future directions for research on the emergence of SSS identity and its relation to SSS attitudes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We do not have permission to share the data from this study.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This study was conducted in accordance with the APA's ethical guidelines and was approved by the IRB at the University of Rochester.

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