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Further Disadvantages of Socioeconomic Status: The Role of Subjective Social Status in University Students' Sense of Belonging

Daniela Fernandez[1] | Chuk Yan Wong[2] | Summer Bedford[1] | Ligia Oliveria-Silva[3,4] | Christopher Begeny[1] | Michelle Ryan[4,5]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA | [2]Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands | [3]Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Uberlândia, Uberlândia, Brazil | [4]The Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia | [5]The Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Daniela Fernandez (knf8pw@virginia.edu)

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ABSTRACT

Attention has been given to increasing the sense of belonging of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups in higher education (HE). Research in belonging has focused on *objective* indicators of socioeconomic status (SES; i.e., educational status, household income), yet focus on *subjective* socioeconomic status (SSS) is more limited. We address this gap in two studies, including a cross-sectional survey ($N = 503$) and semi-structured interviews ($N = 16$), to address two questions: (a) to what extent SSS and a sense of belonging are associated; and (b) what are the social identity processes that might help to explain the relationship between SSS and belonging. As expected, SSS was positively associated with a sense of belonging, such that higher SSS was associated with higher levels of a sense of belonging. Together, these studies illustrate that SSS (a) is yet another way that SES operates to benefit some and disadvantage others; (b) provides an opportunity to analyse the role of intergroup relations in individuals' experiences and (c) is interlocked with intersectional identities, such as ethnicity and race.

1 | Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions remain as hyper-selective institutions spaces, where classism persists (Ostrove and Long 2007). Hence, students from lower socioeconomic groups face multiple challenges that prevent them from fully experiencing educational benefits, such as feeling disconnected from other students (Rubin, Evans, and McGuffog 2019). We argue that the negative social experiences in HE for those from lower socioeconomic groups can be understood, at least in part, through social identity processes. In the present work, we aim to better understand how HE students' socioeconomic circumstances inform individuals' social identities in the form of subjective socioeconomic status (SSS) and how SSS bears on their sense of belonging. SSS can be defined as the individual's beliefs about their location in the socioeconomic structure, considering perceived quantitative differences in their own economic position and education relative to that of others (Adler et al. 2000). While subjective and objective measures of socioeconomic status (SES) are moderately associated

(Tan et al. 2020), subjective measures provide a dynamic assessment about how structural barriers, financial constraints and intergroup relations inform one's identity. Indeed, SSS take into account how these barriers and constrains permeate individuals' perceptions of themselves compared to others, evaluations of their context (Zhao et al. 2023), and their socioeconomic identity (Tan et al. 2020).

Building on these insights, we aim to examine the role of SSS in students' belonging, investigating (a) the relationship between SSS and belonging, and (b) the social identity processes associated with students' SSS and belonging. To this end we conducted two studies: (1) a quantitative correlational survey study to examine the extent of the relationship between SSS and belonging, and (2) a qualitative interview study to explore the underlying social identity processes that might explain this relationship.

1.1 | Sense of Belonging in HE

A sense of belonging has been described as a fundamental need (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and a critical experience for HE students (Walton and Cohen 2007). Research on belonging in HE has been wide-ranging, with great variation in how belonging is defined and operationalised (Allen et al. 2021). Belonging has been defined as personal relationships and bonds with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and feeling connected and accepted by others (Strayhorn 2020).

These diversly but related definitions suggest the possibility that belonging is a multidimensional construct. Psychometric analysis of the widely used 'Sense of Social Fit' scale (Walton and Cohen 2007) reveal four dimensions for belonging: (a) Identification with university (ID), referring to a sense of compatibility, affiliation and integration with the university (e.g., 'I belong at university'); (b) Social match (SM), referring to how one may perceive themselves to align their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours with people they identify as successful in university settings (e.g., 'I think in the same way as people who do well at university'); (c) Social acceptance (SA), referring to a sense of acceptance and positive reception by others at university (e.g., 'People at university like me') and (d) Cultural capital (CC), referring to the information, skills and understanding that one may have to navigate university settings (Maghsoodi, Ruedas-Gracia, and Jiang 2023). Ultimately, different research has suggested the importance of a nuanced perspective when analysing a sense of belonging in HE settings, exploring its nuances and identity processes underlying individuals' belonging experiences.

1.2 | A Social Identity Approach to Sense of Belonging

Indeed, how groups and individuals interact, and how individuals perceive themselves as part of different groups, play important roles in creating a sense of belonging (Ostrove and Long 2007). Social identities—our shared identities with others based on relevant attributes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, profession, etc.)—lead to meaningful psychological and individually internalised group memberships (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In turn, group memberships provide individuals with feelings of belonging. The social identity approach (SIA, Tajfel and Turner 1979) contributes to belonging research as it considers the identity processes that can help to explain why individuals feel they belong (or not) and the strategies used by individuals to cope with belonging uncertainty or lack of belonging (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022).

The SIA provides a framework from which to understand that group memberships operate at different levels and that belonging can be associated with different identity processes produced when individuals and contexts interact. Group memberships can operate at two levels: social categories and social networks (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013). The former provides individuals with a sense of belonging via intragroup similarity and interpersonal bonds. Individuals are more likely to self-categorise themselves in social groups where they perceive similarity and homogeneity with other members associated with that group (ingroup members). In this case, individuals can focus on their similarity with group prototypes, that is, the representation of the attributes that define a particular group (Turner 1975). Hence, they can also focus on other groups' prototypes—especially when they are perceived as having higher status (Turner 1975). For instance, research has demonstrated that when university students with mental health struggles saw themselves as similar to the prototypical university student (defined as the students that do well, are self-confident, and smart) they reported better academic performance compared to the ones that do not see themselves close to the prototype (Lane and Giboons, 2007). Finally, interpersonal bonds focus on the quality of the relationships and bonds among ingroup members, which can be independent from self-categorisation processes (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013).

1.3 | Subjective Social Status and HE Belonging Experiences

Extensive research has shown that a group that faces substantial barriers to belong in HE is constituted by students from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background (Ostrove and Long 2007). This is not a surprise, as socioeconomic identities are meaningful for individuals to self-categorise and categorise others into respective social identity groups (Easterbrook, Kuppens, and Manstead 2020). Some of this research has directly examined the association between (objective) socioeconomic identities and a sense of belonging in HE settings. Research work has shown that students from disadvantaged SES (measured via type of accommodation, distance to university and academic schools) reported lower levels of belonging, compared to students from more privileged backgrounds (Ahn and Davis 2020). Another objective indicator that impacts students' sense of belonging is parental education (Costello et al. 2018; Duran et al. 2020; Gillen-O'Neel 2021). Indeed, compared to continuing generation students, first generation students are more likely to present concerns about belonging (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022). Moreover, these students are more likely to feel their self-concept does not fit with university culture and norms, and feel less similar with the prototype of the university student (Phillips et al. 2020).

Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups do not perceive a fit or alignment between themselves and the values and norms at universities (Stephens et al. 2012). This misalignment appears to be quite strong, for example, even those applying to universities are less likely to apply to high-status institutions because of identity compatibility between the university and one's disadvantaged socioeconomic groups (Nieuwenhuis, Manstead, and Easterbrook 2019). Such a lack of anticipated belonging shows that even in terms of a physical capacity, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups are less likely to occupy public spaces on campus, especially iconic public spaces, compared to students from more privileged socioeconomic groups (Trawalter, Hoffman, and Palmer 2021).

In concordance with the SIA, the lack of fit or alignment with university norms and culture promotes identity management strategies to negotiate their 'university' and 'home' identities (Jury et al. 2017), with negative impact on their well-being (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022). An example is identity concealment, used by individuals to avoid being associated with a low status group or to better fit in with a high-status group (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022). Indeed, in the case of students with lower family household income—compared to the ones with a higher one—they must engage in effortful self-presentation, leaving them feeling depleted (Johnson, Richeson, and Finkel 2011). Individuals might also reject these strategies and assimilation by challenging university culture, either rejecting the university norms and values (Fernández, Ryan, and Begeny 2023), making their SSS identity salient and a source of self-esteem (Finnegan and Merrill 2017), seeing belonging as a resistance strategy to challenge classism and affirm their place at the university (Bettencourt 2021), or 'playing the game', that is, focusing on individual mobility to improve their experiences (Bathmaker et al. 2013).

Thus, while much of this socioeconomic identity research points to an association between socioeconomic identities and a sense of belonging in HE and the identity processes enacted by disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, many of these conclusions have been made by operationalising socioeconomic identities with objective measures. We argue that it is also important to look at how the structural barriers and financial constraints captured by objective measures inform individuals' identity, that is, how these contextual factors inform subjective identifications through SSS on a sense of belonging. Indeed, previous research has shown that students with a low SSS are less likely to feel they belong to university (Ruedas-Gracia, Jiang, and Maghsoodi 2023), which in turn negatively affects their academic performance (Vázquez et al. 2024). SSS has also been linked to a sense of self-prestige, which in turns, was associated with a sense of belonging (Jury et al. 2019). In other words, when students perceive themselves as having a higher social status, they are more confident with their own prestige and they are more likely to perceive they belong.

1.4 | The Current Research

Our current study builds upon previous research exploring the connections between SSS and belonging in HE settings. A SIA suggests that SSS ought to matter for belonging, considering how the attachment to certain groups shapes individuals' belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In this research, we propose that a SIA can shed light on the complexities and nuances of the relationship between SSS and a sense of belonging in HE through: (a) a novel conceptualisation of SSS as a way in which socioeconomic identities operate to inform a sense of belonging; (b) the recognition of social identity processes such as social comparison and perceived similarity activated by contexts, particularly socioeconomic markers present in HE settings (Ostrove and Long 2007) and (c) the recognition of individuals as active actors immersed in intra and intergroup relations, and the role of social identity strategies used to navigate belonging experiences.

Considering the nuances of belonging experiences and to build a comprehensive understanding of their relationship with SSS, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative studies. In Study 1 ($N = 503$) we examined the relationship between SSS and belonging, and aimed to replicate previous research showing the relationship between both e.g., (Vázquez et al. 2024), see also (Jury et al. 2019). We do this with the widely used Sense of Social Fit scale (Walton and Cohen 2007), exploring belonging as a multidimensional concept. Hence, Study 1 aims to (a) provide quantitative evidence of the association between a subjective measure of socioeconomic status and sense of belonging; and (b) explore sense of belonging as a multidimensional concept. Following Study 1 results, in Study 2 ($n = 16$) we explored (a) if and how low SSS students perceived Study 1 relationship between their SSS and their sense of belonging, and (b) the underlying social identity processes that help explain the association of SSS with a sense of belonging. In other words, the identity strategies and categorisation processes underlying individuals' belonging in relation to their SSS (Reynolds et al. 2020). To this end, we conducted online interviews with low SSS students. We analysed the interviews from a SIA, identifying previously documented social identity processes in students' responses.

All studies were approved by the Ethics Committee from one of the author's institutions.

2 | Study 1

In this first study we aimed to examine the association between SSS and students' sense of belonging. We hypothesised a positive relationship between both variables: a higher SSS would be associated with higher levels of sense of belonging.

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

We recruited 600 participants via Prolific to complete an online survey, which was part of a larger study about university students' experiences. We excluded 95 participants because they: (a) were under 19[1] years old; (b) were not enrolled in a UK university or did not declare they were a student in a UK university; (c) were not an undergraduate student; (d) did not correctly answer our attention check (e) and completed the survey in less than 2 min. After excluding these participants, we also excluded one participant that presented more than 20% of missing data in the outcome variable, sense of belonging.

The final sample was 504 undergraduate students (50.9% women, 49.1% men; $M_{age} = 23.40$, $SD = 6.26$; $M_{year\ of\ enrollment} = 2.71$, $SD = 0.87$). When asked about their ethnicity, participants were in their majority White (75.2%), followed by Asian (14.5%), Black (4.8%) and from Mixed backgrounds (4.6%). Of the participants, 5 did not declare their ethnicity (1%). Students attended different disciplines (42.5% Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Maths; 43.8% Humanities and Social Sciences; 12.9% Business; 0.8% not reported) and universities (33.3% attending Russell Group universities[2]). A priori power analysis for structural equation modelling was conducted with the '*semPower 2*' package in R (Moshagen and Bader 2023). A sample size of 133 was adequate to detect an RMSEA of at least 0.05 with an 80% of power on an alpha error of 0.05, therefore our sample of 503 was adequate.

2.2 | Measures

We collected demographic information (e.g., age, gender, field of study). To measure SSS, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjectivity Social Status (Adler et al. 2000). This was a single-item where participants indicated their status on a ladder with rungs from 1(lowest status) to 10 (higher status).

We measured belonging by adapting the 'Sense of Social Fit' scale from Walton and Cohen (2007) for the setting of HE and for our participants as students. We considered Maghsoodi, Ruedas-Gracia, and Jiang' (2023) proposal of a sense of belonging as a bi-factor model with one general and four specific factors comprising of: (a) Identification with university (ID); for example, 'I belong at university', 4 items; (b) SM, for exapmle, 'I think in the same way as people who do well at university', 5 items; (c) SA, for example, 'People at university like me', 3 items; and (d) CC, for example, 'I know how to do well at university', 5 items. All items were scored from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree; with higher values indicating a greater sense of belonging at university. Analyses of subscales will be exploratory, as our emphasis is on overall belonging.

2.3 | Results

2.3.1 | Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1.

2.3.2 | Primary Analyses

We then tested the hypothesised relationship between SSS and belonging, specified with a latent bi-factor structure, consistent with Maghsoodi, Ruedas-Gracia, and Jiang (2023). First, we specify the model with reverse scored items allowed to correlate. The model regressed each item on its respective factor and an overall sense of belonging factor. Following Hu and Bentler's (1999) criteria, the model showed a good fit, SB $\chi 2(92) = 255.405$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.959; TLI = 0.939; RMSEA = 0.059 [0.051, 0.068]. For thoroughness, we compared the bi-factor model with unidimensional, first order and second order factor models. The difference between models' fit was significant, with the bifactor model showing a better fit (For summary of fit indices, see Supporting Informations).

Model-based reliability was acceptable as a total ($\omega = 0.91$). However, and similarly to the previous validation of the scale, omega hierarchical values for factors were low compared to their omega values (ID, $\omega = 0.85$, ωh-ss = 0.07; SM, $\omega = 0.83$, ωh-ss = 0.021; SA, $\omega = 0.81$, ωh-ss = 0.18; and CC, $\omega = 0.67$; ωh-ss = 0.46). Hence, in concordance with previous literature, most of the reliable variance in each factor was associated with the general factor. Consequently, and following previous psychometric properties analysis, we will focus on sense of belonging as a general factor, and interpretations of each factor must be conducted with precaution (Rodriguez et al. 2016; Flora, 2020).

We regressed SSS on a sense of belonging as a general factor and the four factors. The model showed a good fit, SB $\chi 2(104) = 269.758$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.958; TLI = 0.939; RMSEA = 0.056 [0.048, 0.065]. As expected, standardised regression coefficient showed that SSS was positively associated with a sense of belonging: $\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.028$. From the dimensions, only the SM standardised regression coefficient was significant $\beta = 0.171$, $p = 0.004$ (See Supporting Informations for complete results). Therefore, the higher students' SSS, the higher their sense of belonging, and the higher they perceived they aligned and were similar to the people that succeed in university Figure 1.

2.4 | Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 aimed to explore the relationship between SSS and belonging (specified with a latent bi-factor structure). The results support the hypothesised positive relationship between SSS and belonging: the higher students' SSS was, the higher their sense of

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (Study 1).

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. SSS	5.39 (1.75)	—	—	—	—	—
2. Sense of belonging	4.97 (0.78)	0.23*	—	—	—	—
3. ID	5.09 (1.22)	0.19*	0.86*	—	—	—
4. SM	4.70 (0.95)	0.24*	0.86*	0.66*	—	—
5. SA	5.50 (0.88)	0.15*	0.77*	0.68*	0.60*	—
6. CC	4.82 (0.85)	0.15*	0.68*	0.38*	0.42*	0.33*

*Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

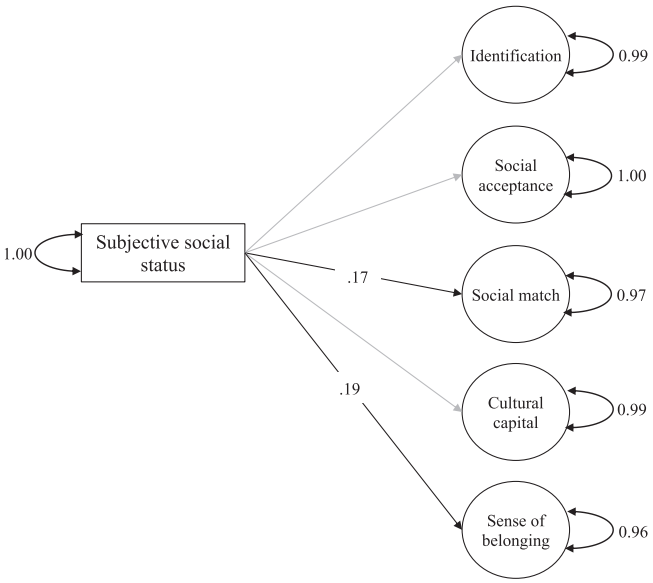

FIGURE 1 | SSS and sense of belonging SEM model. Only significant ($p < 0.05$) standardised regression coefficients are presented.

belonging. Hence, Study 1 showed support for previous research demonstrating that SSS is positively associated with a sense of belonging (Jury et al. 2019; Vázquez et al. 2024) with a bi-factor structure. We exploratorily analyse the data looking at the specific factors. Analyses showed that only SM was significatively associated with SSS: the higher students' SSS, the higher they perceived a sense of alignment with other people perceived as the successful prototype in university. These results support previous contributions from a SIA in belonging, as similarity and homogeneity have been described as key factors that inform students' sense of belonging (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013), particularly when they compare themselves to the 'successful student prototype' (Lane and Gibbons, 2007). Hence, it seems that the effects of sense of belonging might be driven by students' perceptions of similarity with prototypes. This relationship likely informs how HE institutions still reproduce social inequalities, where the ones with more status, are the ones that feel they fit and belong, and are more likely to benefit from HE experiences.

3 | Study 2

In Study 1, we demonstrated the positive relationship between SSS and a sense of belonging. In Study 2 we aimed to understand (a) if, and how, low SSS students perceive their sense of belonging as being associated with their SSS identity experiences; and (b) the social identity processes associated with students' experiences of belonging. To this end, we conducted semi-structured online interviews with low SSS students who self-identified either as first generation, working class or from low-income backgrounds.

3.1 | Participants

Participants were 16 undergraduate students based in the UK. We selected participants through quota sampling (Robinson 2014), aiming for at least 10 participants. Participants were recruited via social media, being invited to complete a screening questionnaire, asking them whether they were (a) over the age of 18 years old; (b) an undergraduate student enrolled in a university in the UK and (c) identified themselves either as working class, first generation, low SES, or low-income households students. Students who indicated they met at least one of these criteria were presented with an initial survey including: (a) demographic questions (age, gender, ethnicity, field of study); (b) the MacArthur Social Class Ladder (adapted from Adler et al. 2000), to assess students' SSS in relation to other people in the UK society and (c) a question about their availability to be interviewed via Zoom. Participants were interviewed until research topics achieved saturation. After excluding two participants that scored above the second quartile (5.5) of the Social Class Ladder scale, the final sample consisted of 8 women and 8 men (self-identified), with a mean age of 24.33 years old (SD = 2.50). Participants self-described their ethnicity as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British ($N = 13$), White ($N = 2$) and Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups ($N = 1$) and were enrolled in a wide range of disciplines. Although we did not purposefully aim for an almost total sample of ethnically minoritised students, we decided to maintain this sample for two reasons. First, this sample mirrors the ethnic composition of disadvantaged socioeconomic groups in the UK, where the highest percentage of people from persistent low-income household are not White (Department of Work and Pensions, 2023). Second, this composition allows us to explore this set of particular intersectional identities (Hurtado 2017), contributing to the increasing (and needed) research interest in looking at how socioeconomic identities are interlocked with race and ethnicity in educational settings (e.g., Ferguson and Lareau 2021). Three participants did not report their university but were included in the sample as they initially stated they were UK university students (see Table 2).

3.2 | Procedure

We contacted students via email, inviting them to an online interview via Zoom and providing information about the compensation (an £15 online store voucher). After arranging the date and time for the interview, students received a unique access link. After the first interview, the script was adjusted to improve clarification, questions and examples. Interviews were anonymised and automatically transcribed via Zoom, with a research assistant revising the transcriptions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min.

The online interviews were semi-structured and consisted of three key themes: (a) introduction (e.g., 'What are you studying?'); (b) their experiences of belonging (e.g., 'How would you describe your interactions with other people at university? Why?') and (c) interpersonal relations and social support (e.g., 'Do you receive support from other students? Is it important? Why?'). Across these themes, we asked participants whether they felt their SSS was associated with these experiences (e.g., 'How important is social class in the university environment? Why?' For the full interview script, see Supporting Information). None of the participants turned on their camera (see Limitations section).

TABLE 2 | Participants demographics (Study 2).

Participant	Age	Gender	SSS[a]	University	Ethnic background[b]	Field of study
P1	25	Man	6	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Psychology
P2	26	Woman	6	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Biosciences
P3	28	Woman	3	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Computer Science
P4	22	Man	6	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Accounting, Economics and Finance
P5	27	Man	4	Non-Russell group	White	Sports
P6	23	Woman	6	Not reported	BACBB	Geology
P7	23	Man	5	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Accounting, Economics and Finance
P8	23	Man	6	Not reported	BACBB	Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology
P9	24	Man	5	Russell group	BACBB	Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology
P10	24	Woman	3	Russell group	BACBB	Biosciences
P11	25	Man	5	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Psychology
P12	21	Man	3	Not reported	BACBB	Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology
P13	26	Woman	1	Russell group	BACBB	Natural Sciences
P14	28	Woman	2	Russell group	White	Creative arts and Design
P15	22	Woman	2	Non-Russell group	BACBB	Accounting, Economics and Finance
P16	27	Woman	1	Russell group	MMEG	Drama

[a]Lower values mean lower perceived SSS.
[b]BACBB: Black/African/Caribbean/Black British; MMEG: Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups.

We analysed the interviews following a reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2019). Our analysis was informed by the SIA (Tajfel and Turner 1979). We analysed the interviews acknowledging that an important element to understanding students' experiences of belonging are their social identities.

We followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019), using NVivo (v14.23). We began the coding process following a deductive (or theory-driven) analysis, considering the research questions and theoretical approach. In this stage, in the coding process we considered semantic and latent content, informed by a SIA. We stopped analysis when the research team reached an agreement about the subthemes and themes, and we perceived that the way we grouped the codes, subthemes and themes answered our research questions.

3.3 | Positionality

Due to the nature and approach of this study, we consider it important to acknowledge our identities and beliefs with the purpose of engaging in a reflexive process (Braun and Clarke 2019). We are a group of researchers in the field of social psychology with experience working with underrepresented groups in organisations. As our team includes individuals with personal backgrounds as first generation/low SES students and/or minoritised ethnic and racial groups, our research throughout has informed our careers with a motivation and interest in understanding social inequalities. Due to our background and training, the interview materials and analyses were developed with an emphasis in understanding how context and social factors play a role in maintaining inequalities, rather than considering it an individual responsibility solely or an essentialised difference by social groups.

3.4 | Analysis[3]

We read and interpreted the interviews identifying (a) students' experiences of belonging and their perceived role of SSS in these experiences; and (b) how students' responses could be associated with previously documented social identity process analysed. Following students' responses, we identified three SIA elements that will inform our analysis: social identity strategies (Tajfel and Turner 1979), intragroup similarities (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013), intersectional disadvantages (Hurtado 2017). We created two themes to approach the question of how SSS experiences play a role in students' belonging in university: (1) Belonging at the intersections of structural inequalities, and (2) Identity management strategies to belong.

Overall, students shared that SSS was, to differing extents, an important aspect of their identity when navigating HE. The majority of participants ($N = 12$) defined belonging as positive interactions with others and SA. Three students described belonging as feeling like they fit in a place, and one student described belonging as acquiring the knowledge to succeed in university-similar to CC. Ten students recognised the negative impact of SSS on their sense of belonging, with two students explicitly naming intersectional disadvantages (SSS and ethnicity).

Students referred to two approaches to navigating these challenges, from emphasising intragroup similarity, to distancing themselves from their SSS identity and emphasising individual mobility. In some cases, participants shared both approaches simultaneously, highlighting the complexities and importance of context to understand how individuals cope with inequalities. For details on codes, subthemes and themes, see Supporting Informations.

3.5 | Belonging at the Intersections of Structural Inequalities

3.5.1 | Social and Financial Comparisons

Most participants ($N = 13$) described financial circumstances as being important when talking about their belonging experiences. Participants shared the importance of intergroup comparison with other students in terms of financial resources, and how the perceived (lack of) similarity was an important factor in understanding their place in university (Turner 1975). This social comparison was informed by behavioural signals and resources, such as clothing. Students described challenges in balancing the demands of their socioeconomic circumstances with academic activities, especially when they needed to work to cover their expenses:

> It is actually a lot [working and studying], but I just have to do it. If I don't, how am I supposed to survive? So it's actually not easy. Personally, I don't actually have any time to myself, like leisure time or whatever. I just have to sacrifice that in order to balance my finances and everything (...) I'm like a robot, just academics and finance (P4)

Therefore, university social structure, shared norms and values related to the importance of financial resources. The lack of financial resources was seen as a barrier to accessing different activities that can help students to feel part of the university and boost students' sense of belonging. This aligns with previous research (e.g., Rubin, Evans, and McGuffog 2019), which has evidenced how financial resources were important for belonging in activities that promote social integration: 'Sometimes they [other students] might just want to hang out and visit places, and then probably attend a concert (...) and sometimes you might be at work (...)' (P3). Hence, financial circumstances informed students' identity through social comparison processes and were important to structure the self-concept and identity.

3.5.2 | SSS, Ethnicity and Discrimination Experiences

Students reported discrimination experiences at different identities and intersections, showing the importance of SSS and ethnicity in their sense of belonging. In interactions with outgroup members (in this case, students from wealthier backgrounds) eight students described concerns about being a target of discrimination due to their appearance and manners as a signal of their economic background:

> The way they [students] behave with me. When I get home, I will just be complaining to my mum 'This is what is happening'. And my mum will still be saying 'Continue, continue'. So, I talked to my cousin, the first thing she asked me was 'What are the kind of clothes that you put on to school? Did you do make-up, what kind of shoes?' So, from there I say maybe it is because of my dress that is why people do not relate to me much (P13).

Considering the sample composition (81.3% self-identified as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British), appearance and manners can also be associated with ethnic discrimination, highlighting intersectional discrimination (Scheim and Bauer 2019). Two participants, in conjunction with referring to SSS discrimination experiences, also described intersectional discrimination: 'I feel it affects because most times, people look at my colour and I feel this isn't meant for you and most times I feel it because of my socio-economic situation because people feel some things are not meant for black people, so everything is meant for the white' (P7).

Hence, considering the social ethnic distribution of individuals from low-income households (with a majority of mixed and Black individuals within this category), ethnicity is an important identity that interacts with SSS and, therefore, belonging experiences: 'I think both [SSS and ethnicity] goes hand in hand, they work together... I think people feel you are less (...)' (P7). Such experiences are particularly important to elucidate as socioeconomic markers have historically been used, even among social scientists, to minimise the effects of racism and ethnic discrimination (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001). Our findings provide further evidence that these realities that are often thought of separately are co-constitutive in our participants' lived experiences.

3.6 | Identity Management Strategies to Belong

3.6.1 | Emphasis on Intragroup Similarities

As reported in previous research (e.g., Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013), a sense of belonging is informed by perceived intragroup similarity and homogeneity: 'The ones I have as coursemates, we have a study group where we share opinions and maybe something that is similar, that we tend to get through together and I like to speak to them' (P6). Hence, to feel they belong, students emphasise their similarities with others. Such cases align with the similarity-attraction paradigm in that students seem to be positively drawn to similar

others and can build positive interpersonal relationships with them (Byrne 1997). Particularly for low SSS groups, to find other students similar to them that also struggle to belong will not necessarily mean that their sense of belonging to university will increase. Rather, in building positive relationships with similar others—and even forming groups and group identities with these similar others—students seem to build social support networks to collectively navigate common adversities and struggles, and emotionally supporting one another. These processes, albeit different from belonging, can promote students' belonging to particular groups within university: 'Most of them are people who are low-income just like me, so I feel we are most compatible. I feel like a good friend will be able to understand, even if they don't have, they will feel like 'Oh she doesn't have' (P10).

When students recognised SSS similarities with other students, they were more receptive to receiving support from other students. Social support from other students was particularly focused on academic support (e.g., study together, sharing materials) and financial support (e.g., borrow money): 'Actually, it's not been easy there [financial situation] sometimes it can be so tight that it's not that encouraging but then at the experience they [friends] actually try for me, they provide for me, nearly everything I need' (P2).

Hence, for participants, intragroup similarity appears as a critical precursor of belonging: 'I think we get to understand one another better (...) we get the same challenges and try to work around it' (P3). However, not only categorisation but interactions are important, seeing groups as social networks (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013). Participants reported that feelings of belonging mainly derive from their everyday interactions with others and relationships among SSS (and likely ethnicity) group members.

3.6.2 | Social Identities Concealment

For some students, a sense of belonging was associated with enacting different identity strategies, particularly trying to conceal their SSS identity. SSS was seen by a group of participants ($N = 3$) as an identity that can be disguised: 'When you see us [participant and friends] you wouldn't be able to differentiate that this person is not from this type of social group or class' (P5). Moreover, when participants referred to discrimination experiences, they enacted identity concealment strategies to avoid future discrimination: 'I tend to be very social but in my own group of friends of my own type (...) but when I'm out of university I don't want to be too loud, I don't want to be flashy (...)' (P7). Although the interview questions were focused on SSS, participants' responses can be associated with intersectional stereotypes for Black women (i.e., being flashy, being loud; Ghavami and Peplau, 2013). Hence, it is likely that participants aimed to conceal multiple stigmatised identities: SSS, ethnicity and even gender. For instance, referring to the stereotype of Black low SSS men as aggressive: 'Most of the times, I stay cool, I don't want to run to people, I don't want to make people feel afraid of myself, most times I stay clear of trouble' (P8).

3.6.3 | Individual Mobility

Additionally, students distanced themselves from SSS by downplaying its role in some of their university experiences, focusing on how university can help them to improve their status and socioeconomic situation, pointing again to how SSS and its associated differences are naturalised in universities:

> I would say, it doesn't affect in anyway, because I have come to the university to get myself improved and not to use my socio-economic situation as an excuse not to succeed in life and in the university. So, I feel it doesn't affect it in any way. Instead, it gives me the boost to a couple of my issues, and cope with everything (P12).

Hence, students recognised financial inequalities in their ability to succeed at university, but also denied the importance of these barriers and in some instances seeing them as a source of motivation to pursue their aims, similar to individual mobility strategies outlined by social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979):

> I said I do it, it happens, the social class limits your background but I don't let it get to me and I don't think its stopping me in anyway (...) don't get me wrong, as it's not so simple, I don't let it get to me a whole lot, I tried to push it back and tried to see ahead and what is in front of me which is my education (P8).

3.7 | Discussion

Study 2's findings provide information about the potential reasons why low SSS (in their majority from marginalised ethnic groups) students have a lower sense of belonging relative to high SSS students. Following a conceptualisation of belonging as feeling accepted by others and being part of a community, low SSS students recognised financial constraints as barriers to belonging, especially when they compared themselves to students with more resources. These financial constraints affected their sense of belonging as they needed to balance their academic responsibilities with having a job and corresponding worries about money, and they had less access to academic and extracurricular activities. Students also described discrimination experiences which they associated with signals about their appearance, in terms of their SSS and ethnicity (clothing, make up, behaviours). Hence, these findings support the idea that SSS is one of the ways that SES manifests and informs students' identity. To understand belonging in HE contexts, it is relevant to acknowledge the role of multiple and intersectional identities within these processes. SSS identity experiences do not work in isolation, and they relate to other identities that, in the case of the participants of this study, were associated with their ethnicity. Hence, the HE system might provide different cues that make that some identities become more salient than others.

Students took an active approach when facing barriers to belonging. They approached these barriers with two different, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, strategies: aiming for intragroup similarity and identity concealment. In the latter, interviews showed that students concealment strategies operated performatively, this is, managing the visibility of their SSS and ethnicity. The behaviours described to conceal were aligned with intersectional stereotypes, such as being flashy or loud (Ghavami and Peplau, 2013). Additionally, students also aimed to conceal their identity in the long term, focusing on their studies and academic performance to improve their status and future opportunities, in line with individual mobility and endorsement of meritocracy strategies.

4 | General Discussion

Using a social identity framework, we sought to analyse the relationship between students' SSS and their sense of belonging (Study 1), and potential social identity processes that could explain this relationship (Study 2). Both studies supported the importance of SSS for belonging in HE contexts. Low SSS students demonstrated a lower sense of belonging and a low SM with prototype university students, compared to high SSS students; low SSS students also described barriers to feeling like they belonged at their universities. Taken together, both studies support previous research showing the link between socioeconomic circumstances and sense of belonging, and the limited research looking at SSS and belonging. Furthermore, both studies (and particularly Study 2), provide insights for understanding how individuals from particular SSS groups experience belonging, and how they negotiate their SSS self-concept (in conjunction with ethnic identities) to feel like they belong at their universities.

To our knowledge, our study is one of the first to explore the properties measured in the Sense of Social Fit scale typically used to measure belonging. Study 1 provides evidence to support previous research proposing a bifactor structure for the Sense of Social Fit scale used to measure a sense of belonging (Maghsoodi, Ruedas-Gracia, and Jiang 2023). Likewise, Study 1 supported the relationship between SSS and belonging and provided initial evidence showing that SSS could be particularly important for students' sense of similarity and match with others, particularly with students' prototype. Moreover, when we explore the different dimensions of belonging, Study 1 showed that students' sense of alignment with the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of other students perceived as the prototype of a 'successful university student' was associated with their SSS. This initial finding supports previous research looking at the role of perceived similarity and prototypes in a sense of belonging (e.g., Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013; Lane and Gibbons, 2007).

Our results can contribute to this body of research, focusing on HE and SSS. Indeed, despite the extensive research looking at belonging and students' socioeconomic circumstances (Costello et al. 2018; Duran et al. 2020; Gillen-O'Neel 2021; Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022), research focusing on SSS, in other words, the subjective aspects of SES, is limited. However, our research provides evidence regarding the importance of SSS, demonstrating the adverse effects of SES *and* SSS on students' experiences, and how SSS operates in the development of prototypes in a sense of belonging.

In conjunction with examining the relationship between SSS and belonging, we examined how low SSS students perceived these differences, and the social identity processes that underlay these experiences. Our analysis established three key social identity elements within the interviews: intragroup similarity, social identity strategies and intersectional disadvantages. Study 2 findings showed that SSS can be perceived through signals such as racialisation—clothing, skin colour and stereotypes in this sample, but also accent and name in other UK-based research (Frumkin and Stone 2020; Kutlu et al. 2022), and participating in social activities with financial costs. Hence, belonging is grounded in structural inequalities at the intersection of multiple identities (Yuval-Davis 2006) where SSS-identity based experiences can be seen through a social identity lens; through self-categorisation, our SSS identities in conjunction with other intersectional indicators of SES such as racialization or ethnicity, become salient in contexts, and are used to make sense of one's experiences and cope, where SES resources are signalled and express certain qualities of (embodied) group identities. This has been the case for categories related to SES such as parental education—being a first-generation student as a social identity (Thomas and Azmitia 2014; Bettencourt et al. 2020) or being 'working-class' (Finnegan and Merrill 2017), and therefore this research contributes to a better and nuanced understanding of SSS as a social identity informed by SES.

Participants described different identity strategies as a way to distance themselves from their background (both SSS and ethnicity), changing their appearance or behaviour. This pattern aligns with social group distancing research describing a situational predicament, whereby the environment—particularly where one's group membership is devalued and negatively stereotyped—may encourage marginalised group members to distance their personhood from the stigma attached to these identity groups to help one improve their individual standing (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022).

These strategies were not only focused on concealing SSS, but in some cases, also their ethnicity. Indeed, Study 2 highlighted the importance of understanding these experiences with a multiple identity lens as a group of students mentioned how ethnicity affects their experiences at intersections to their (multiple) identities. Participants' responses pointed out ways that felt racism interacts with their socioeconomic context to inform a general sense of (a lack of) belonging.

4.1 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings contribute to the diverse and wide-ranging perspectives on belonging. We argue that SSS is positively associated with a sense of belonging and that in the case of low SSS, these differences can be explained due to sociocultural differences and financial constraints, and how these inform students' identities through social identity processes, such as intergroup comparison. Moreover, Study 2 findings contribute to previous research on social identity processes in low SSS students in HE, showing real-world examples of how these identity

processes are experienced by students and integrating the importance of intersectional identities, particularly in terms of ethnicity. For instance, students highlighted intragroup similarity which promoted feeling understood by others with similar struggles. Altogether, these findings support previous research (e.g., Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013) showing the relationship between perceived intragroup similarity and belonging in the same way our findings highlight the importance of perceived similarity of SSS struggles and belonging.

Additionally, exploratory analyses of the sense of belonging subscales showed that particularly SM was associated with SSS. This subscale highlighted the role of prototypicality for students' sense of belonging. Hence, when measuring belonging, researchers might be focusing on SM and the extent to which students perceive themselves similar to a 'successful university student' prototype. An emphasis on being similar to the prototype can lead to homogeneity in HE institutions, as the ones that 'match' with the prototype are the ones that aim to be part of the institution (Phillips et al. 2020) or stay (Chang et al. 2020). Previous research outside HE settings has shown that this perceived mismatch promotes individuals' exit from their professions or organisations (Peters et al. 2012). Study 2 findings provide evidence that low SSS and from minoritised ethnic groups university students are more likely to use strategies to maintain themselves at university. For instance, students distanced themselves from their socioeconomic and ethnic social group (Veldman, Meeussen, and van Laar 2022) and assimilated to university culture (Stephens et al. 2012) to avoid discrimination from other students. Our study also contributes a novel approach towards identity concealment, highlighting that this strategy might be associated with intersectional identities recognised as stigmatised and, likely, informed by intersectional stereotypes (e.g., that Black people necessarily come from low-income backgrounds, Black women being described as 'loud' or Black men being described as 'aggressive'; Ghavami and Peplau, 2013).

Hence, our findings highlight the importance of acknowledging how SSS is interrelated with other identities, in this case, ethnicity, which in some contexts might be more salient than SSS or intersect with SSS. In fact, it was reliably students from Black/African/Caribbean/Black British backgrounds who spontaneously brought up ethnicity in the context of SSS. This suggests that, at least for some students from these backgrounds, their SSS is tangled up with their ethnic identity-which was not the case for White students. Hence, when all students, regardless of their ethnicity, are asked about their SSS, using the scales we tend to use, we might be capturing how White students think about their SSS, missing important aspects for students from minoritised groups, such as the role of intersectionality and how both racism and classism work together.

Our research also has practical implications. Ensuring that all students, especially those from underrepresented groups such as low SSS students, feel they belong to their universities is still a target of numerous and not always effective interventions. We provide evidence that can inform interventions and strategies to support students' belonging should consider belonging as a multidimensional concept related to different social identity processes that can help to promote a sense of belonging. An important insight from these findings is that structural barriers and financial constraints inform individuals' identities. Hence, interventions to increase students belonging should not only focus on providing individual strategies to cope with challenges related to belonging (e.g., bridging courses, resilience workshops), and additionally acknowledge existing socio-structural and organisational inequalities.

4.2 | Limitations and Future Research

One of our main limitations is that participants interviewed in Study 2 were not a subsample of participants from Study 1. Therefore, we were not able to establish whether students' responses in the survey were directly associated with their open and in-depth interview answers. Study 2, in particular, provided an exploratory framework to explore social identity processes that may serve as mechanisms to low SSS students' belonging relative to high SSS students. Thus, our aim was not to establish causality between studies and this approach, and doing so allowed us to get a broad overview of how SSS and belonging were associated with each other. However, future research may benefit from using various research instruments and questions in examining (the same) respondents' behaviours, attitudes and attributions, such as using follow-up interviews to provide more nuanced and in-depth approximation to survey responses. Furthermore, going forward, it would be valuable to conduct a series of studies designed to rigorously test Maghsoodi's model structure.

Second, both studies were conducted with participants located in the UK. The UK context appears as an ideal scenario to explore SSS experiences in HE. The British social class system is fundamental in UK society (Heath and Bennet 2023). Moreover, the UK HE educational system is well known for its segregated structure, with working-class students making up only 11.5% of students attending the most prestigious universities (The Sunday Times 2020). Although we recognise that our research is situated in a particular context, this also allows us to explore the nuances and particularities of SSS identity and belonging experiences across very different SSS groups. Hence, because SSS and belonging change across cultures, and our research addresses only the UK HE reality, the generalizability of our findings should be taken with precaution. Future studies need to test whether the SSS differences in belonging hold consistently in different countries/cultures.

Related to participants' characteristics in Study 2, previous research in educational settings has shown how race, ethnicity and SES are interlocked (Gee et al. 2012). For instance, SES provides more benefits to White students, compared to African American (Battle and Lewis 2002). Our findings provide an initial exploration of belonging experiences of racially minoritised and low SSS students. Future research is needed to understand students' experiences at this and other intersections (i.e., White low SSS students).

Finally, although students were invited to turn on their cameras during the interviews, none of them did. The lack of camera 'on' does not allow the inclusion of non-verbal data in the analysis, which in some cases might be important, especially regarding

sensitive topics. At the same time, when interviewing disadvantaged groups, privacy and respect for participants' well-being is a priority, and the use of a camera can be experienced as invasive to participants' privacy. This action flares two possibilities: that participants may have not felt comfortable during the interview and therefore did not turn on their cameras, or that the sense of anonymity that the camera off provides led them to give more intimate responses. Hence, online interviews provide benefits in terms of access to participants and costs (e.g., Oliffe et al. 2021), but also challenges. These implications must be considered given that in present post-Covid-19 pandemic times, online interviews are extensively used.

5 | Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated SSS association with a sense of belonging, and the experiences of belonging of low SSS students. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data allowed us to provide a more in-depth approach to understand belonging, showing that students approach belonging differently, and they use different strategies to navigate HE contexts when they feel they do not belong. Furthermore, the use of both data informs future models integrating belonging with social identity processes. The SIA contributes to an understanding of socioeconomic identities showing how these are informed by contextual and financial circumstances. Overall, we discuss that SSS is an important identity, as it is informed by socio-structural barriers and financial concerns, demonstrating the dynamic aspects of SES in individuals' identities. Indeed, our qualitative data show that a sense of belonging occurs within intra and intergroup relationships, evoking social identity strategies to increase a sense of belonging. Besides, a sense of belonging considers organisational norms and culture—which are grounded in hierarchical social structures—and how individuals align or not with them. Hence, it is not only about 'changing individuals' perspectives about their contexts, but rather fixing the contexts. Failing to consider these aspects may contribute to maintaining the status quo, with the cost of further enforcing barriers to individuals' sense of belonging.

Author Contributions

D.F. conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing. C.Y.W. formal analysis, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing. S.B. formal analysis, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing. L.O-.S. conceptualization, writing – review and editing. C.B. conceptualization, supervision, writing – review and editing. M.R. conceptualization, supervision, writing – review and editing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] Due to an error in the survey, the age of 18 was not included as an option, going from 17 to 19.

[2] In the UK, Russell group universities are considered highly selective, prestigious, and elite universities. The Russell Group was formed in 1994 with public research universities and are usually highly ranked in the UK and internationally.

[3] Following Braun and Clarke (2021), the findings section heading will be titled as 'analysis'.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.