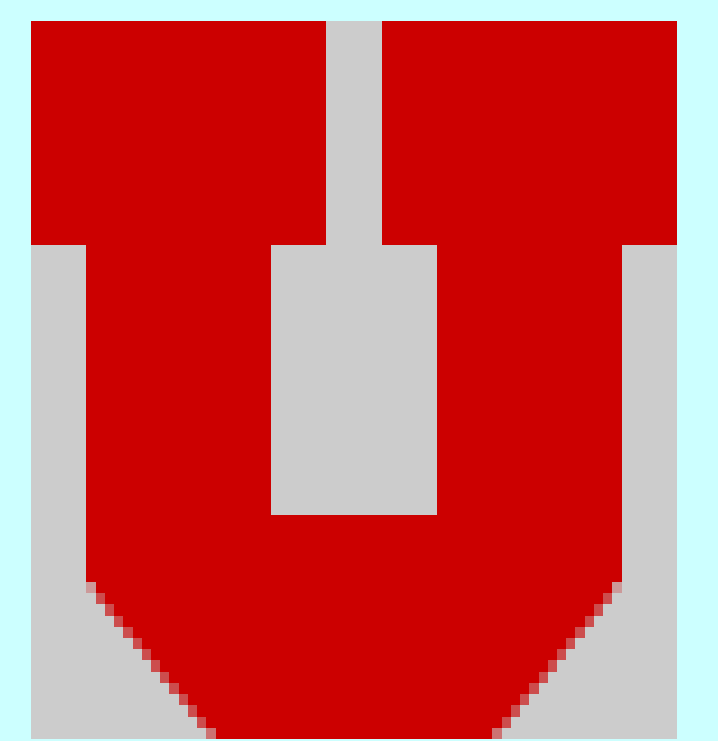


Relative Status, Partner Dominance, Depression, & Self-Rated Health

Jenny M. Cundiff, Timothy W. Smith, Bert N. Uchino, Cynthia A. Berg



ABSTRACT

The present study of 300 married couples examined differences in spouses' reports of SSS (i.e., relative status) and partner dominance as predictors of depression and self-rated health (SRH). Relative status (status relative to those in one's more immediate environment) has been shown to be a more proximal influence on health outcomes than absolute status, arguing for the importance of repetitive *exposure* to others who are of higher status. Further, interacting with a dominant other has also been shown to evoke stress in laboratory settings, and exposure to dominant others may be particularly stressful for those in low-status positions. Results revealed that:

- For **depression**, lower relative SSS was associated with greater depression for both husbands and wives only if the spouse was rated as dominant and controlling, but with less depression if the spouse was rated as low in control and dominance.
- For **SRH**, lower relative SSS was associated with worse SRH for wives only if the spouse was rated as dominant and controlling, but with better SRH if the spouse was rated as low in control and dominance. The interaction was not significant for husbands.
- Spouse differences in SSS in the local community were more closely related to outcomes for women, whereas spouse differences in SSS in the broader US population were more important for men.

Overall, these results reveal that differences in SSS within married couples are related to health-relevant outcomes, such that perceptions of low status *and* exposure to controlling spouse behavior may be particularly unhealthy.

INTRODUCTION

Subjective Social Status (SSS) refers to an individual's perceived standing or rank in a social group or community, specifically one's perception of where they stand relative to others.

SSS predicts health over and above traditional measures of SES (e.g., income), apparently through psychological and interpersonal pathways.

Marriage is a central relationship in many adults' lives, and the quality of this relationship also influences health. Differences between spouses in SSS could also have important health consequences, as another aspect of relative standing in important social contexts.

Whereas SSS refers to perceptions of relative standing, dominance refers to specific social behavior involving expressions of interpersonal control or power. Importantly, interacting with a dominant person has also been shown to evoke stress in laboratory settings.

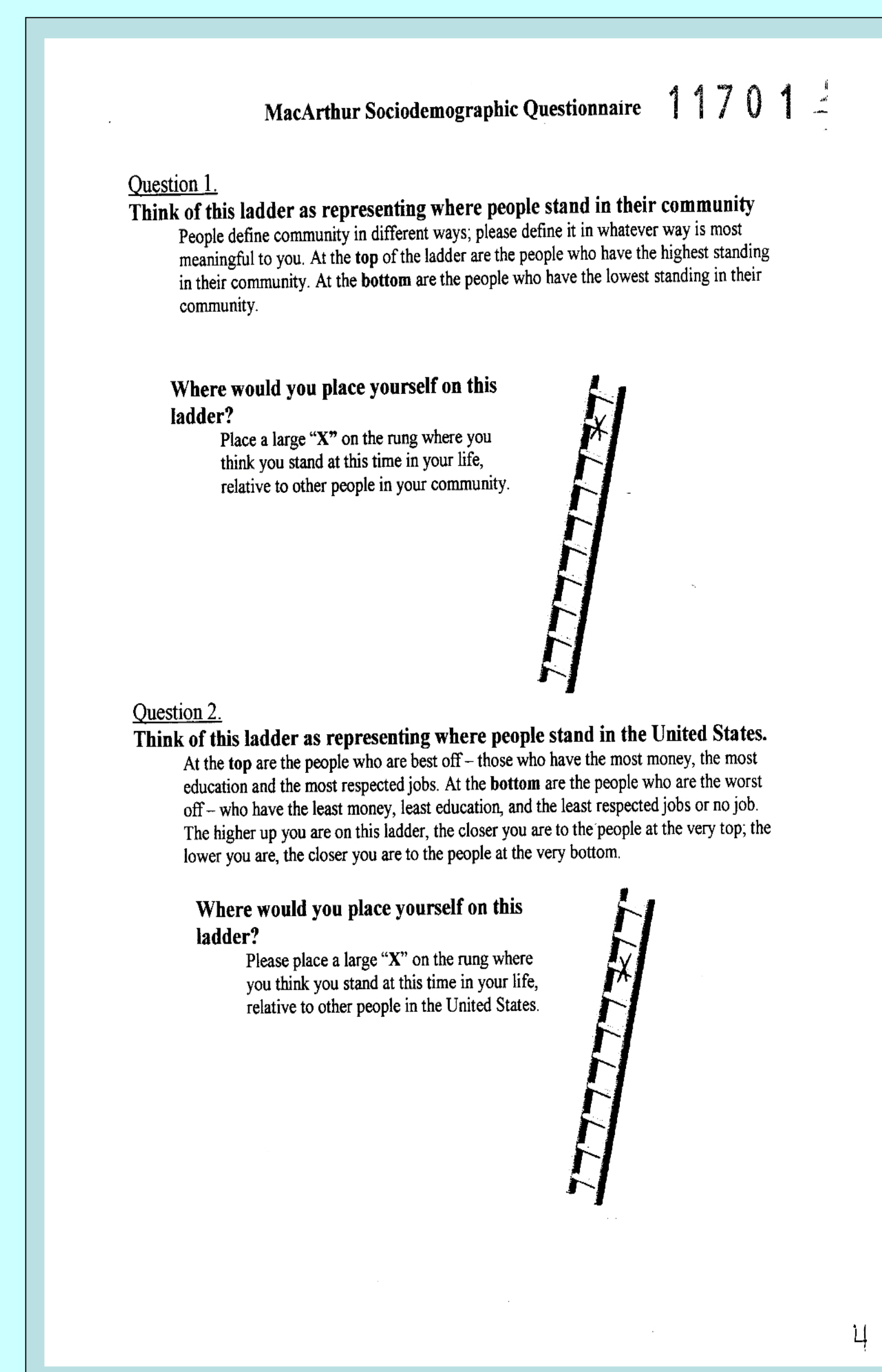
Exposure to dominant others may be particularly stressful for those in low-status positions.

Participants

Our sample consisted of 300 older and middle-aged couples. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (96%) and recruited from the greater Salt Lake City, Utah community as a part of the Health and Aging Study at the University of Utah. Middle-aged couples had been married for an average of 19 years and older couples had been married for 37 years.

Subjective Social Status

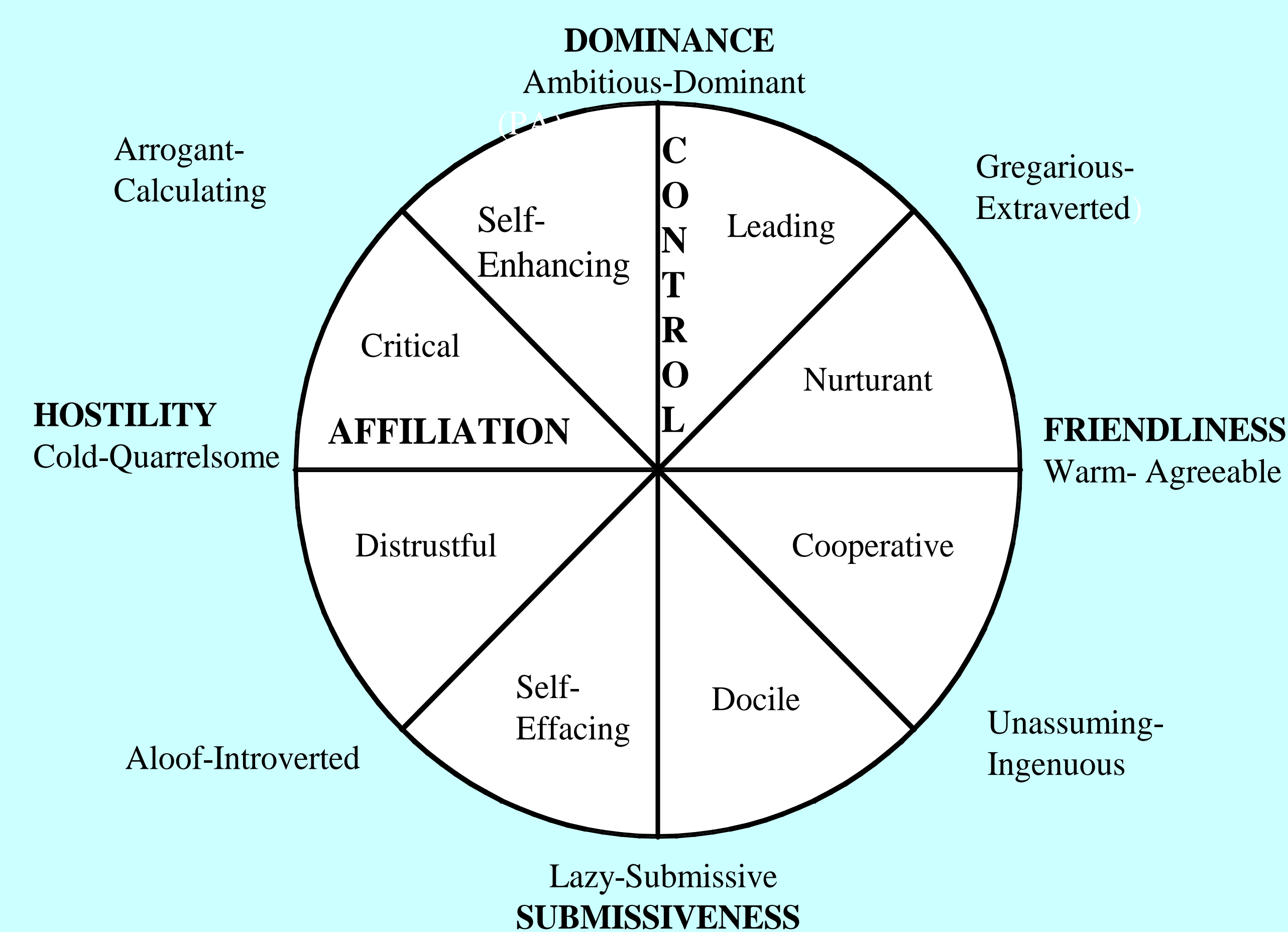
The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status uses two scales to measure SSS, one rating perceived status within the US (SSS_{US}) and one rating perceived status within the community (SSS_C). See figure below.



METHODS & RESULTS

Partner Dominance

Spouses were asked to rate their partners' behavior in the marital relationship using the IMI-C. In interpersonal theory the dimensions of affiliation (i.e., warmth, friendliness vs. coldness, hostility) and control (i.e., dominance vs. submissiveness) define the interpersonal circumplex (IPC) and are used to describe social behavior (see below). The IMI-C is a 32-item measure, which consists of 4-item subscales corresponding to IPC octants, and assesses perceptions of the target individual's behavior on the IPC dimensions. Scores for the control dimension, which we refer to as dominance here, were created through weighted combination of the eight subscales.



Outcome Measures

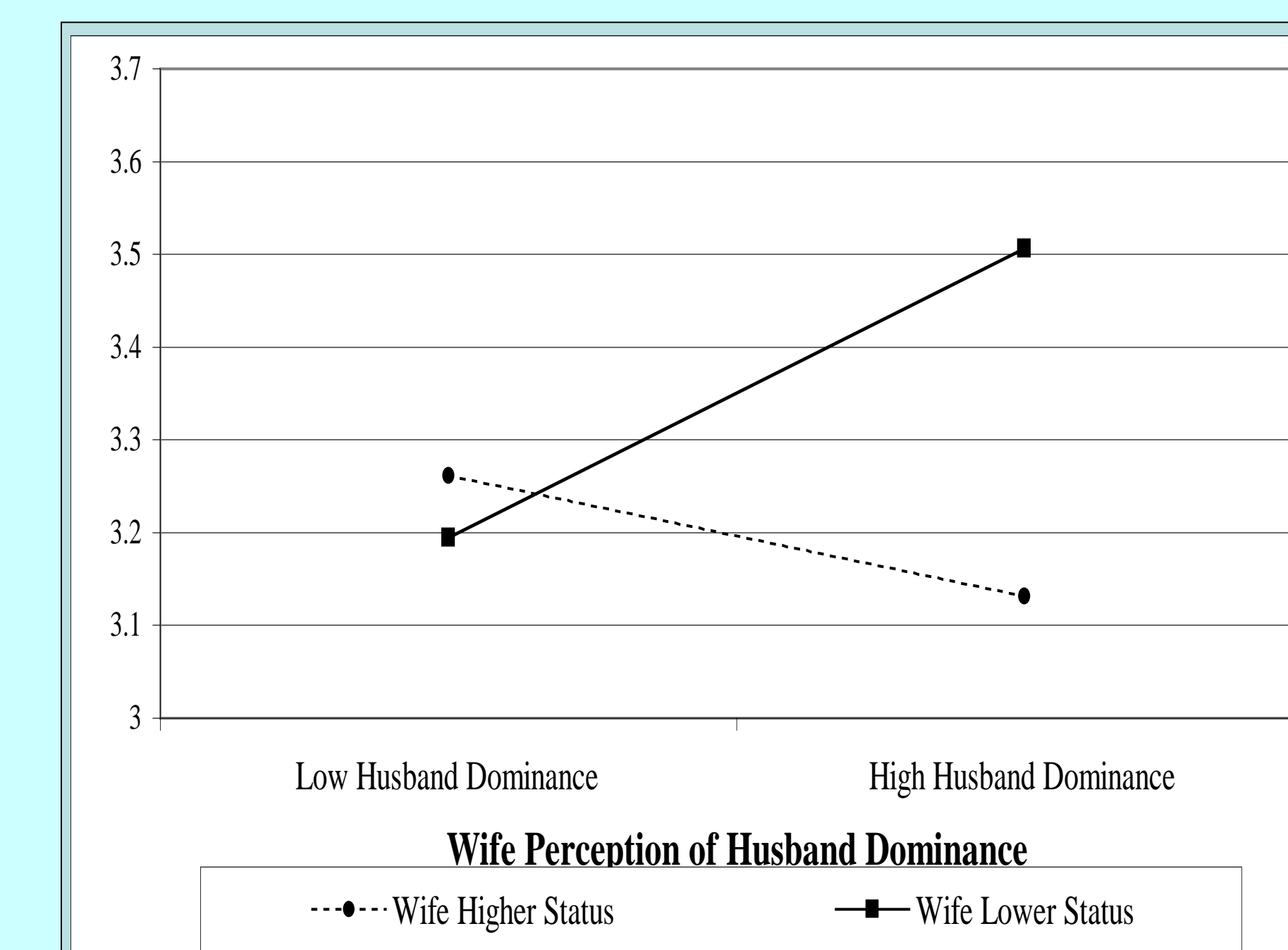
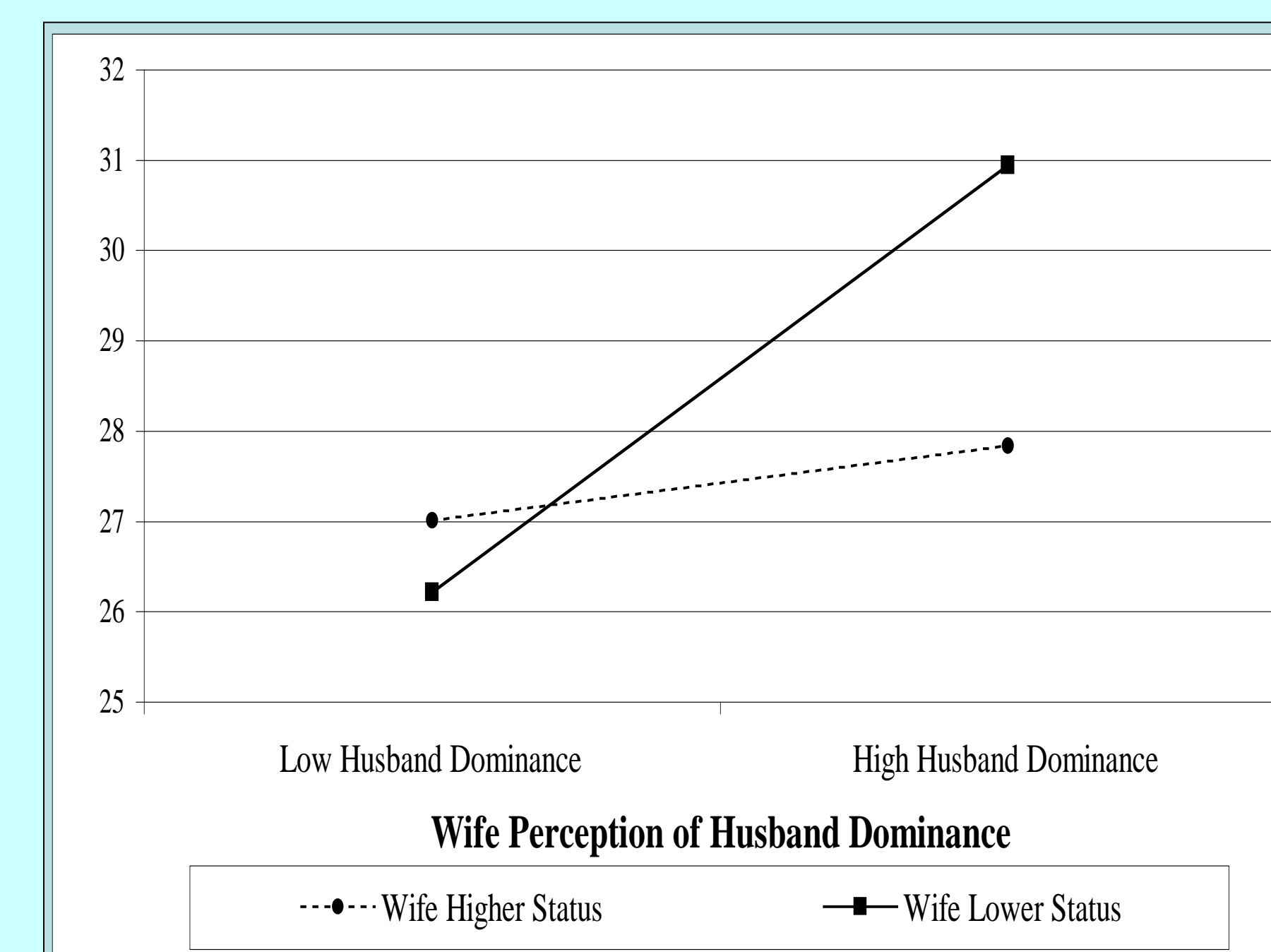
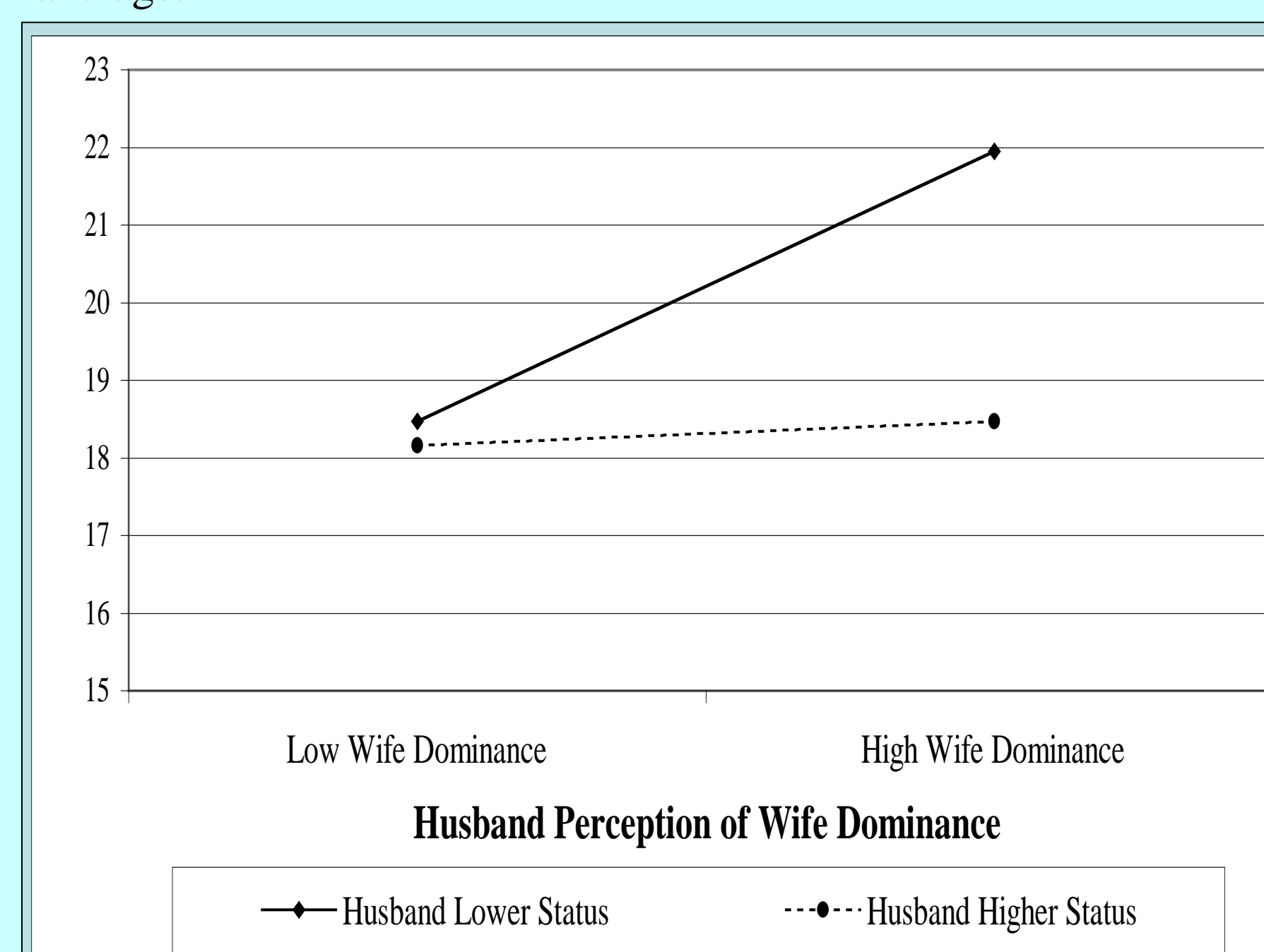
- Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D).

- Self-rated Health (SRH)

In general would you say your health is...
Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

We used contrast codes to divide couples into two categories, those in which the wife's self-reported SSS was higher than her husband's and those in which the husband's self-reported SSS was higher than his wife's. We then used multiple regression to test the interaction between relative status and perceptions of partner dominance in marital interactions. We also entered age and income into these analyses, thus results presented below represent the interactive effects of relative status and partner dominance on outcomes *independent* of couples' objective resources (i.e. income) and age.



Depression: Relative Status x Partner Dominance

There was a significant interaction such that spouses who reported lower SSS compared to their partners reported more depressive symptoms only if they also rated their partner as dominant and controlling, but with similar levels of depressive symptoms if they rated their partner low in dominance and control. This interaction was significant for the community measure of SSS for wives and the US measure of SSS for husbands.

SRH: Relative Status x Partner Dominance Effects

There was a significant interaction such that wives who reported lower SSS compared to their husbands reported worse (higher) SRH if she also rated him as more dominant and controlling but with better SRH if she rated him as low in dominance and control.

CONCLUSIONS

➤ For both men and women, perceived social status relative to a spouse and partner dominance were only associated with more depressive symptoms when spouses were lower status and rated their partners as dominant and controlling. For women but not for men, this was also true for reports of their own physical health.

➤ These results suggest that, at least in the context of marriage, partner dominance may only be psychologically (and perhaps physically) toxic when individuals also perceive that they have little standing to combat these bids for control/dominance.

➤ Although we did not test gender differences here, these results are also consistent with other literature suggesting that marital strain may be more physically toxic for women as compared to men.

➤ Interestingly, we found that health-relevant outcomes were more closely related to perceived social status in the community for women, but more closely related to perceived social status in the country for men. We hypothesize that community status may be more closely related to communal concerns, to which women may be more sensitive; and in turn US status may be more closely related to agentic concerns, to which men may be more sensitive.

➤ Though an important relationship, marriage is only one relationship of many. More general measures of both relative status as well as dominance in one's environment may shed additional light on the potentially potent impact of the combination of low status *and* perceptions of low interpersonal control in everyday interactions.

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