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Status: What It Is and Why It Matters for Inequality

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Status: What It Is and Why It Matters for Inequality

ISSUE EDITORS
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The Significance of Status: What It Is and How It Shapes Inequality

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Status, a form of inequality based on esteem, respect, and honor, pervades social life but is poorly understood and underestimated in terms of significance. We offer a new look at status as a dynamic relationship between the shared views of others and the self that organizes behavior at the micro, meso, and macro levels of society. The status process is governed by a taken-for-granted sociocultural schema consisting of implicit norms for allocating status based on the perceived value of the individual to the group, as well as on historically changing status beliefs about what types of people are more worthy and competent than others. Status plays a role as a powerful motive for individual and group action and in the construction of durable patterns of inequality based on social differences such as race and gender. The pernicious effects of status processes can be mitigated by undermining status beliefs, stereotypes, and norms.

Keywords: status, inequality, sociocultural schema, gender, race

Status is everywhere. But what is it, how does it work, and why can't we ignore it? Why is it that a concern with status no longer seems to be just a vanity, a concern of insecure status-seekers, or the abstract scholarship of social scientists? Why do these questions seem so urgent? Examples of threats to status, ways to mitigate threats, ways to claim status, and situations and conversations that turn on status can be picked from the headlines.

In rural and white working-class contexts, people are pushing back against the status threat of cultural dominance by urban elites. Many now claim that social class status was at least as important as economics in driving support for Donald Trump as president (Cramer 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018). In the racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd, companies and organizations rushed to claim allyship status by pledging to support Black businesses (Hsu 2020). The state of California announced that lunch is now free for public school students—a bold move to reduce the stigma and

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low status associated with free lunch programs (James 2021). American Meghan Markle captured worldwide attention when she joined the British royal family and struggled with a change in a status, one that required deference to the queen. Of course, in all of these examples, social media played a powerful yet still uncharted role in status-making, enhancing the status of some and challenging the status of others, often overnight.

In this double issue, we take another look at status, answering some of the questions of status and how it works and why we care now. We approach status not as an entity that is obvious and that some groups and people have and others do not, but as an ongoing set of processes that have often been too invisible for too long and that may be both more complex and consequential than we realize. We show here that status deserves much more attention and recognition (one might say more status) for the way it holds social worlds together but sometimes rearranges them, and especially for its role in inequality.

STATUS: WHAT IS IT?

Max Weber ([1918] 1968) famously highlights status as a form of inequality that is different from power and wealth and that, although often correlated with them, has its own distinct effects on social relationships and life outcomes. Wealth is possession of valued, exchangeable resources, such as money and goods; power derives from control over positions in organizations that produce and distribute valued resources (Emerson 1962; Tilly 1998). But status is different. It is inequality based on differences in the esteem, honor, and respect accorded individuals and groups in the social worlds in which they participate. These terms and many others used variously in different contexts and disciplines (dignity, worth, value, reputation, standing, face) belong to a large family of concepts that refer to the shared views of others and that communicate the evaluative position an individual or group has in their mutual social world. In the workplace, some become more admired, prominent, and influential than others and are often favored for good opportunities. The same thing happens among students in the classroom. It also

happens among senators on a task force. Relative esteem and status attaches as well to the significant groups to which people belong— their preschool, college, retirement home, church, and nation— but also, importantly, to their racial group, their gender, and their class background. The status of people's group identities affects how they are treated by others in all aspects of their lives, including the institutional contexts such as work, school, and health organizations that are consequential for their life outcomes.

As all this suggests, status is everywhere in social life, a ubiquitous form of inequality that interpenetrates modern, ostensibly meritocratic institutions such as schools, workplaces, and government. Status even attaches to objects, such as a BMW versus a Kia automobile, but does so through association with high- and low-status individuals and groups, so we do not deal separately with that here (Veblen [1899] 1953). Status is also an ancient form of inequality and is apparently universal in human societies (van Vugt and Tybur 2016). It emerges from the deep sociality of humans, the way they look to others for their sense of worth and depend on them for what they want and need in life (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015). Yet, despite its deceptive familiarity, that it is right in front of our faces in everyday life, status is so taken for granted as to be oddly invisible to us as scholars of inequality. The fundamental nature of status as a form of inequality—what it is, how it works, and why it matters for life outcomes—remains poorly understood.

Status may be poorly understood partly because its significance in social life is often underestimated which has reduced scholars' motivation to study it closely. From the perspective of social sciences that focus on collective and group-level processes, such as sociology, political science, and some parts of economics, status is often thought of as a mere gloss on more powerful, underlying inequality processes based on wealth and power. From the perspective of social sciences focused on individual-level processes, such as psychology and other parts of economics, status is highly implicated in well-known concerns such as belonging or group identity yet is rarely analyzed for its broader array of sources and consequences.

Status Emerges in Interaction Between Others and the Self

Appreciating the pain or the humiliation of a threat to status, the anxiety that anticipates the threat, or the comfort that accompanies having status affirmed or assured is relatively easy. But discerning and investigating what status is, why status is continually manifest and how it works has been harder, even for social scientists. One part of the difficulty of fully grasping the centrality of status in the United States is that it emerges in interaction and in the relationship between others and the self.

Capturing and analyzing the relationality that is status and the inequality it generates may be particularly taxing in highly individualist cultures like those of North America. Here, most people, and even some social scientists, when they seek to explain behavior, are likely to emphasize the actions of the individual but less likely to emphasize the ongoing connection between the individual and others. In the more collectivist contexts common in much of the world, relational dynamics are more evident and elaborated as the source of behavior (Markus and Kitayama 1994; Rai and Fiske 2011; Vignoles et al. 2016; Triandis 1995). In U.S. contexts, although "others" are acknowledged, scrutiny often goes first to the preferences, motives, goals, and capacities of the individual.

American ideology also makes the relational process of status harder to see. A cultural emphasis on the self and an ideological focus on equality among unconstrained individuals is built into America's foundational documents and continually stoked by everyday narratives and cultural products. Despite the many overlapping status hierarchies that organize social life for almost everyone in the United States, the American Dream says it does not and should not matter. No matter who you are or where you have come from, if you work hard, you should have an equal opportunity to succeed (Hochschild 2016). Echoing this powerful theme, a recent cultural product—a best-selling children's book—urges girls to push against the gender status hierarchy —"don't let anyone tell you who you are. *You* tell them who you are" (Harris 2021, emphasis added).

Another part of the difficulty in appreciating the significance of status and understanding its nature is that status is manifestly a multilevel process. It involves status among individuals in interpersonal groups as well as status among groups in societies. Moreover, status, as esteem granted one individual or group relative to another, is a kind of reputation. That is, it operates through the shared beliefs of others toward the individual or group. These shared beliefs are part of the culture of the group or society. Thus, in contrast to better-known inequality processes such as wealth or power, status is primarily a cultural process.[1] We explain these points in more detail.

Although status may be distinctive as an inequality process, we argue that the failure to take it seriously is a major mistake. At the micro level, we will never understand the motives involved in the struggle for precedence that lies behind inequality if we do not take into account how much people care about being seen as worthy and valued in the eyes of their group and society. At the macro level, we argue that we will never come to terms with inequality based on categorical differences among people, such as race, gender, and class (understood as lifestyle and culture) if we do not understand the role status plays in such inequalities.

In what follows, we argue that status is best understood as a sociocultural schema people use to manage situations in which they are cooperatively interdependent to achieve valued goals that they want or need, but competitively interdependent to maximize their personal outcomes from the collective effort. Such situations are fundamental to the human condition, which is one reason that status is ubiquitous in social life. Before we turn to explaining the sociocultural schema model of status, however, we begin with the evidence that status is in fact both a motivating concern for individuals and an inequality process that is apparent over a wide range of social spheres. After describing the sociocultural schema model, we

1. Culture is defined in various ways in the social sciences. We use culture to mean shared ideas, beliefs, and values as well as the norms and practices that reflect them both at the interpersonal level and at the organizational level (Hamedani and Markus 2019; Ridgeway 2019).

then use it to show more clearly how status has powerful and distinctive effects at the societal level.

Status Shapes Individual Motivation

Social psychologists have been especially active in demonstrating some aspects of status as a motivating concern even if they have not always used the term in their studies. Since Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* was published in 1954, studies have tracked how the negative and devaluing views of others toward the groups that people identify with matter for their life outcomes. Status is all about what other people think. Research across the social sciences has revealed how the devaluing views of prejudice and the group stereotypes they are based on are often driven by and reflect status concerns (see, for example, Bobo 1999; Fiske 2011).

Status as Stereotypes

A vivid demonstration of the power of group stereotypes in the way people assign status and also how status changes with the situation was on display in a recent European soccer championship in which Italy defeated England (Burdick 2021). The English team included a number of Black players from African countries. When England lost, viewers hurled racial slurs and epithets at the Black players on the team who had missed their penalty shots. The pundits noted this status-making and status-taking in action, reporting, "when you win, you're English; when you lose, you're Black." A related study compared the performance of all Black soccer players in the European league during the first half of the 2019/2020 season with their performance on second half of the season, which occurred during the pandemic when no audience was present (Caselli, Falco, and Mattera 2021). Relieved of the devaluing views of others during the game, the Black players who were most commonly targeted showed a 10 percent improvement in performance when they played to empty stadiums.

Sometimes people are well aware of the influence of others on their status or their sense of worth or value. In many other cases, they are not, or, given the individualist cultural press to resist the influence of others, claim not to be.

The agenda-setting contribution of the theory of stereotype threat and research has been to illuminate how being seen through the lens of a stereotype about one's gender, race, social class, or age can have a pervasive influence on all aspects of performance across multiple domains (Steele 2010). As we will see, it is the status content of stereotypes that links group identity to performance (Fiske et al. 2002). Claude Steele and his colleagues reason that for negatively stereotyped groups, the negative views of others did not need to be explicitly invoked, as in the soccer example, to undermine performance. Instead, the pressure not to confirm a stigmatizing view of one's self is sufficient to undermine performance.

Black college students who think a task is a test of academic competence score more poorly than Black students who believe the same task requires trying out a new puzzle (Steele 2010). Asian women reminded of their gender identity on a questionnaire before a math test score more poorly than Asian women reminded of their ethnic identity (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady 1999). White people talking to a stranger showed a greater increase in blood pressure when talking to a Black stranger than to a White stranger (Mendes at al. 2002). Why?

When performing in the shadow of historically and societally pervasive stereotypes that links class or race or gender to poor performance, people become vigilant. This is the case for Black students who assume a task is a test of academic competence and for women who take a difficult math test. It is also the case for White students in conversation with an unknown Black partner, aware that their race may be linked to general racial insensitivity. In these situations, people's heart rates and blood pressures can change, their minds race, and distracting and self-doubting thoughts can enter (Schmader and Hall 2014; Krendl et al. 2008). Notably, these stereotype threat effects are most apparent when people are strongly identified with the activity at hand and among people who do not themselves believe the stereotype. A concert of internal activity can divert attention from the task at hand, dampen performance, and generate anxiety. Often people report no awareness of the stereotype. Yet rearrange the situation so that the

stereotype is lifted and no longer relevant, and performance returns to normal higher levels. Hundreds of studies demonstrate similar and related effects of group stereotypes in multiple domains, showing the relevance of status for almost all forms of individual behavior (for reviews, see Liu et al. 2021; Schmader and Hall 2014).

Across studies of stereotype threat, the activation of a well-known stereotype reflecting the views of others devalues some aspect of identity and generates anxiety over one's individual or group status in that moment. The source of that anxiety is some awareness of one's relative positioning in a broader social system that confers more advantage and worth to some over others. Although people commonly talk about people who *have* status, at school, work, or in the organization, these studies underscore the fact that status is not a natural, basic, or permanent attribute of a person. And whether one's status is threatened by a stereotype depends on the constellation of relational realities that make up particular situations, including how one is treated or has been treated in similar situations relative to how others are treated, how one infers one's group (racial, ethnic, gender, class, or other) is perceived and how one believes they and other members of their group should be treated relative to others, and what is at stake for them and others in that situation, and of course how the others in the situation respond to the stereotype.

People at the top of the ladder often think, feel, and behave differently from those on the lower rungs, whether the ranking is objectively anchored with clear indications of status, subjectively experienced, or manifest through the temporary manipulation of status and social comparison (for reviews, see Fiske and Markus 2012; Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010; Wilkinson 2000) For example, with respect to psychological experience, those at the top of the status ladder tend to be more optimistic, experience more positive and few negative emotions, and feel less threatened and anxious than those at the bottom (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). They also have a relatively stronger sense of themselves as relatively independent from the others, have more interest in expressing their preferences, choices, and goals, and more

practice in influencing and controlling social interactions (Stephens et al. 2012).

Of course, people individually and together find multiple ingenious ways to navigate status threats, to counter status disavowal and to reclaim and assert status. For example, African Americans, many of whom are continually subject to the cold wind of negative stereotypes, often report the highest self-esteem scores of all ethnic groups. (Twenge and Crocker 2002; Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000). Yet, when people repeatedly experience situations in which they are cast into lower-status positions by cultural stereotypes, institutional policies, and devaluing interpersonal interactions, some enduring consequences are likely. It is here where the growing volume of work linking status with health and well-being is particularly informative (Hoebel and Lampert 2020).

Status Under the Skin

A serious concern with how status can shape health and well-being began with the Whitehall studies of civil servants in England (Marmot et al. 1991). In these investigations, those in low occupational grades had much worse health and higher mortality than those in higher grades, but surprisingly improvements in health and mortality were evident at each occupation level up to the very highest occupation levels. These findings challenged the widespread view that social class differences were primarily a matter of economic circumstances, and underscored that status is indeed more than just a reflection of material resources. Studies in the United States confirm this clear gradient between social class and health (Adler et al. 1994; Adler and Stewart 2010). Although socioeconomic status is important in explaining race disparities in health outcomes, significant differences in health inequalities remain even when SES is controlled (Franks et al. 2006; House and Williams 2000). These disparities track a deficit in status as indexed by stereotype exposure, ongoing devaluation across multiple domains, and disrespectful treatment (Phelan and Link 2015). Confronting and negotiating pervasive and multilevel insults to status can result in a cumulative wear and tear on the body's systems (Brown and Turner 2014)—on their biological health as indexed by levels of

inflammation, cardiovascular and immune system functioning, body mass index, and so on.

The strong relationship between status and health suggests that people's sense of their position on the social ladder—their subjective socioeconomic status gets under the skin and affects health above and beyond their objective socioeconomic status. A relatively lower status can instigate a recursive cycle of poorer mental and physical health in which those who experience the compounding stress of discrimination, invisibility, less respect, and less personal worth typically have worse health and shorter lives. In contrast, multiple forms of higher status can instigate a recursive cycle of higher mental and physical health in which those who experience the compounding positive effects of visibility, no explicit discrimination, a sense of respect and personal worth, and favorable social comparisons have better health and longer lives. The mechanisms that tie status to health are complex and both social psychological and psychoneurobiological (Hoebel and Lampert 2020). The accumulating evidence implies, however, that a critical element of reducing inequality and thereby enhancing individual and group motivation, performance, health and general well-being is restoring or elevating both individual and collective respect, worth, and value.

Belongingness and Affirmation
Can Mitigate Status Threats

When people are affirmed and included rather than threatened and excluded and when they sense that they are seen and accorded some appropriate standing, they tend to feel comfortable and that they belong (e.g., Walton and Crum 2021). Studies in the social psychological literature organized by the label of self-affirmation or belongingness do not invoke the concept of status explicitly. Yet they demonstrate that when people experience a sense of being valued and of worth, motivation and performance improve. In one study, Black and White students in a racially integrated school characterized by a strong racial achievement gap were given a chance to write down some of their most important values. They wrote about family, music, friends, or religion. Other students wrote about their least important value

and why others thought they were important. This affirmation improved the performance of the Black students, reducing the achievement gap with the White students (Cohen et al. 2006). Explicitly recognizing and affirming a person's relevant identity groups has similar positive effects on performance (Brannon, Markus, and Taylor 2015).

Transitions from one social situation to another is a time when many worry about whether they will fit in or belong and, as we see, this involves a sense of whether they will be respected or devalued in the new situation. Focusing on the transition from high school to college, one study followed first-generation and African American college students who read the stories of older college students who told them not to worry about whether they belong in college and assured them that if they felt worried about their belonging, their situation would improve with time. This exercise increased the percentage of students who stayed full-time enrolled in college, relative to those in a randomized control condition, by 10 percent. These students chose to live on campus, used academic support services, and joined student groups (Walton and Cohen 2011; Walton and Wilson 2018) . Similar interventions have been effective in mitigating a chilly climate for women in male-dominated spaces. One study in which students heard stories from older engineering students and also wrote a letter to a future engineering student raised the grades and motivation of women in male-dominated engineering majors, eliminating the gender gap in achievement (Walton et al. 2015). A wide variety of other methods, some much more indirect and involving seemingly small changes to the social environment can also increase people's sense that people "like them" belong in a particular situation. These include school websites, mission statements, or walls of fame that represent and explain the value of a diverse student body and thus strive to flatten the status hierarchy and foster a sense of inclusion. For example, a study with a diverse sample of adolescents from more than one hundred schools finds that when schools emphasize the value of diversity (indexed by mentioning diversity in their mission statements), the health of students of color in these schools is better as re-

flected in multiple physiological measures (Levine et al. 2019). This difference was not observed for the White students.

Status in Norms and Institutional Forms

Thus it is evident from studies on stereotype threat, self-affirmation, and belonging that one's sense of self, one's position or status in the situation, emerges between people, depends on the relations among them, and is consequential for individual behavior. My status in this situation depends on your view of me. Of course, if the devaluing reaction was just one person's view—one teacher with low expectations, one potential boss who passes over a résumé, one neighbor who never says hello, it is possible to avoid or ignore the particular encounter and maintain a sense of esteem and respect. Yet stereotypes are so powerful and inequality-generating because we presume them to be the beliefs of "most people." They are shared beliefs that are dispersed deeply, that are widely reinforced, and that package and deliver inequality through people's ongoing relations with one another at school, at work, and in the community, shaping their life outcomes.

A situation may appear free of a concert of the devaluing views of others, or chock full of indications of one's belongingness, but one never knows about the next situation. Many people in many situations seem to "just know" that women or people from working-class backgrounds, or one of many minoritized groups are less competent in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields than men. The views of others are ever present, and the reflections of stereotypes with their devaluing status implications are built into all levels of organizational and institutional cultures, including the physical environment (see, for example, Cheryan et al. 2009). In some settings, stereotypes can be effectively kept at bay by shoring up people's sense of value and worth and with strategies for alternate ways of making meaning in a situation (Thomas et al. 2020). Yet, in many cases, they are easily brought to mind. As Steele theorizes, they constitute "a threat in the air." They are compelling evidence at the level of the individual for the ubiquity and power of status. They also illuminate sta-

tus as an inequality-generating force that extends well beyond its powerful influence on the individuals' feelings of their belongingness or group identity.

In some cases, the status-allocating views of others—particularly those related to race, ethnicity, gender, and social class—are so widely shared and have been taken for granted for so long that they are reflected in unmarked organizational and institutional norms and seldom recognized as biasing, stereotyping, or devaluing. Instead, these norms are seen as standard, neutral, or necessary policies and practices (Cheryan and Markus 2021). For example, many organizations that are currently actively engaged in efforts to mitigate gender bias are still rooted in a powerful foundation of masculine beliefs and norms that prevent the full participation of women. This mostly hidden foundation can be found in the valuing and rewarding of employees who behave independently, policies requiring that employees nominate themselves for promotion, and interaction styles in which assertively interjecting and debating is necessary for being heard and having influence (Cheryan and Markus 2021; Diekman et al. 2011; Kang 2014; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Wynn and Correll 2018). Taken for granted, invisible norms that value and reward independence as the most worthy and competent way to be are also common in many universities, colleges, and workplaces. These norms can devalue the more interdependent motivations and actions that often drive students from working-class backgrounds to attend college and can undermine their achievement and performance (Stephens et al. 2015).

THE MULTILEVEL AND SOCIOCULTURAL NATURE OF STATUS

We said at the outset that one of the difficulties in coming to grips with status as an inequality process is that it is primarily a cultural process, in contrast to the more material and concrete processes of wealth, which involve exchangeable resources, and power, which is based on the control of valued resources. That status is a cultural process would benefit from a little unpacking. Because status is the esteem and perceived social value accorded one individual or group relative to another, as we have seen, it

is rooted in the beliefs of others. It reflects these others' roughly shared beliefs about which individuals and which groups are "better" than others at what the group values. As Erving Goffman and others have pointed out, individuals can take strategic actions to claim status, but they cannot directly seize and possess it as they can wealth or power (Goffman 1956; Goode 1978; Gould 2002). The same is true for groups in society. Status must be granted by the collective views of others. If these views change or become less widely shared, status can be lost. For instance, Bill Gates can engage in philanthropy to gain esteem and status in the eyes of his countrymen. But if information becomes public that undercuts shared views of the value or sincerity of his philanthropy, his status will decline despite his continued wealth and power and that decline will reduce his appeal as an exchange partner for others.

In this way, as we have said, status exists in the social space between the individual or group and the surrounding community, that is, in the relationship between them. And that relationship is continually being negotiated through the actions of the individual or group and the ongoing evaluative reactions of the community, as reflected in its emergent shared beliefs and norms in regard to the individual or group. Thus status is a process, something people and groups do and continually redo rather than a fixed personal attribute. Because this process is governed by shared beliefs and the associated practices of a group or community of people, we refer to status as primarily cultural in nature.

As the description of status as an ongoing process illustrates, status is inherently a multilevel process, involving the interplay between an individual and the surrounding interpersonal group or between a group and the surrounding community or society. Because status hierarchies or inequalities develop among individuals in interpersonal groups as well as among groups such races or genders in society, status is a multilevel process in this sense too. Decades of research on the development of status hierarchies in interpersonal groups, particularly that associated with status characteristics and expectation states research, has shown that the status society attaches to individuals'

group identities, such as race, gender, education, or class background powerfully shapes their esteem, status, and influence in interpersonal groups (Berger et al. 1977; Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014; Berger and Webster 2018). This is the message of the stereotype threat research we reviewed as well (Schmader and Hall 2014; Steele 2010).

As such research clearly shows, status between groups in society and between individuals within groups are not separate processes but instead fundamentally linked in the way status works as a system of inequality. Widely shared beliefs about the relative status of groups in society are part of the macro-level culture of that society. But they affect inequality most directly by affecting the evaluative treatment of individuals at the micro level of interpersonal relations, including mediated relations, such as when someone assesses the résumé of another. In other words, the inequality embedded in society's status beliefs about people's significant group identities is delivered home to the individual and shapes their life outcomes at the level of what people do every day in their work-oriented relations with one another. To understand what status really is as an inequality process and what its significance is for inequality in people's valued life outcomes, we need a model of status that can account for its multilevel and processual-cultural nature as well as its ubiquity in social life.

Status as a Sociocultural Schema of Norms and Status Beliefs

Status is ancient, universal, and ubiquitous, we suggest, because it arises out of a fundamental tension in the human condition. Whether people like it or not, they have to cooperate with others to get most of what they want and need in life from the basics of survival to what it takes to make them happy. We have to work with others to make a living, to find meaningful relationships and develop satisfying self-identities, and to form families and raise children. But this deep cooperative interdependence that is built into the human condition has nested within it an inherent competitive tension. When people coordinate their efforts, questions necessarily arise about the terms on

which their relationship will be conducted and how the spoils of their joint efforts will be divided. Who will be the center of attention? According to whose will and judgments will joint actions be determined? Everyone has an unavoidable interest in forming cooperative endeavors but everyone also has an interest in maximizing what they get from those endeavors. Status is best understood, we argue, as a sociocultural schema or blueprint for organizing social relations to manage this basic tension and produce collective outcomes (Ridgeway 2019).

William Sewell (1992) has argued that social structures have a dual nature, consisting on the one hand of a cultural schema of rules for enacting the structure and, on the other, of the material distribution of behaviors and resources that result from that enactment. The sociocultural schema of status is a structural schema in this sense.[2] It is a set of deeply learned, taken-for-granted cultural rules that people use to organize their behavior with others in a manner that produces a status hierarchy—that is, a behavioral ranking in esteem demonstrated through deference, prominence and, typically, influence over collective decisions. As people draw on the familiar, if implicit, sociocultural schema of status to organize the many shared endeavors they engage in, status pervades social life from the interpersonal to the organizational (Ridgeway 2019).

To some, the claim that status is regulated by a sociocultural schema of rules might seem controversial. The obvious alternative would explain status entirely in terms of long-standing evolutionary theories of dominance and hierarchy and more recent evolutionary arguments about prestige (Cheng and Tracy 2014; Henrich and Gil-White 2001; van Kleef and Cheng 2020). Yet recent analyses show that these evolutionary arguments cannot fully account for status hierarchies as they are commonly observed, particularly in groups of three or more (Ridgeway 2019). Furthermore, they do not explain the reach of status beyond the interpersonal group. If, instead of a cultural process based on shared beliefs and rules, status were based solely on

evolved, individual attributes and response tendencies, it would be confined to interpersonal hierarchies. Yet, as we have seen, status processes as we observe them involve hierarchies among groups in society, such as races, genders, and classes, as well as among individuals. This is difficult to explain without understanding status as a sociocultural process. The status schema may be a cultural development laid on a residue of evolved responses, this suggests, but it is not reducible to them. In this it is like language, which is fully cultural in nature but developed on top of evolved capacities.

The Basic Norm of Status

Especially if people might have some evolved tendencies for rank and deference, why might they develop a sociocultural schema of rules to regulate deference and status? Cecilia Ridgeway (2019) argues that it is the interdependent interest of group members in who ends up high status that gives rise to the development of cultural rules, or norms for status. Under goal interdependence, who ends up high status in the group affects all our interests. If, for example, that person who likes to talk but does not seem to know much about our problem ends up high status rather than the quieter one with experience, that affects my outcomes as well as theirs. As a result, whatever status we egoistically desire for ourselves, we want others in the group to defer to others who appear most able and willing to contribute to the collective effort because this will maximize success and the shared benefits that flow from that (Ridgeway and Diekema 1989). This means we are likely to pressure others to defer on the basis of expected value to the group. The consequence, though, is that, by the same token, we will be faced with pressure from others to defer on this basis ourselves. In this way, as Christine Horne (2004) shows, such an interdependence of exchange interests gives rise to group norms that members enforce. Here it creates implicit norms for deference on the basis of perceived value to the group's goal efforts.

Evidence is overwhelming that interpersonal status hierarchies grant deference and

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2. We call the status schema *sociocultural* rather than just *cultural* to emphasize its nature as a structural schema in Sewell's (1992) sense.

influence to group members in proportion to their perceived value to the collective effort (Anderson and Willer 2014; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Note the emphasis on perceived value, given the possible disjunction between perceived and actual value (Correll et al. 2017; Lynn, Poldolny, and Tao 2009). This is the basic norm of status, which people learn from observations and treatment by others and pass on through their own behavior so that it becomes deeply learned, taken for granted cultural knowledge for most people. The norm is a means by which the group exercises some control over a would-be dominator who threatens to take over the group without contributing to the shared endeavor. In a study of status among MBA students, Cameron Anderson and his colleagues (2006) show that students who tried to claim higher status than their peers felt was justified by their value to the team were isolated and disliked. Ridgeway and David Diekema (1989) also find that when a member of a decision-making group attempted to seize influence through dominance that was not backed up by competence, other members turned on the dominator and rejected him or her. Norms can be recognized not just by their enactment, but also by their enforcement. Here we see evidence that people enforce the basic status norm with sanctions against violators and do so spontaneously (Anderson, Ames, and Gosling 2008).

Cultural Status Beliefs

The sociocultural schema of status is more complex than the basic status norm, however. The expectation the norm creates for deference to others on the basis of perceived value to the group immediately confronts the individual member with a second question. How can she figure out what her fellow members will take to be the signs of greater or lesser value to the group? Ridgeway (2019) argues that people solve this coordination problem by developing shared cultural *status beliefs* about the attributes and behaviors that indicate higher or lower levels of status worthiness and types of competence. Especially in a Western, achievement-oriented society such as the United States, beliefs about status, that is, who is "better," and therefore more valuable to the

collective endeavor, are closely associated with presumptions of instrumental competence (Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske 2011).

Experiments show that people form shared status beliefs about the indicators of worthiness and competence quite easily and act on these newly formed status beliefs in their subsequent treatment of people (Ridgeway et al. 2009). Other evidence shows that such beliefs are widespread in U.S. culture. Research shows that status beliefs form central elements in the widely held cultural stereotypes of all the major social difference groups by which inequality is patterned in the United States, including race, gender, class, education, and occupation (Fiske et al. 2002; Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007). It is because beliefs about status and competence are embedded in group stereotypes that stereotype threat can affect performance. North Americans also have status beliefs linking assertive, agentic behavior with greater status and competence (Conway, Pizzamiglio, and Mount 1996). These same studies show that status beliefs are recognized by people as "common knowledge" in that they are presumed to be the beliefs of "most people" (Fiske 2011). In that way, common knowledge status beliefs function as ready bases for coordinating judgments of value to the group (Chwe 2001; Thomas et al. 2014). They allow group members to form roughly shared perceptions of who in the group is "better" than whom for the collective effort (Anderson et al. 2006; Anderson et al. 2012; Troyer and Younts 1997).

Common knowledge status beliefs work to coordinate status in the group because each group member presumes that the others will act according to them and thus must take those beliefs in account in their judgments and behavior. In other words, widely known status beliefs act as a kind of social map that we all presume we are all looking at in figuring out how to behave. For instance, in a work group in which some have Ivy League credentials and others do not, all are implicitly aware of the expectations this difference evokes and take that into account in their behavior whether they agree with the expectations or not. Thus common knowledge status beliefs allow group members to quickly converge on a rough working consensus in their relative ranks in the group status hier-

archy even if not everyone in the group fully endorses the status beliefs as correct (Anderson et al. 2012; Correll et al. 2017). They similarly draw on shared status beliefs to make sense of subsequent events in the group in an ongoing process through which they jointly maintain or renegotiate the hierarchy. Indeed, the formation and maintenance of an ongoing, working consensus on status in interpersonal groups is probably only possible because it does not require complete agreement at the level of what each member "really deserves."

A Twofold Status Schema

The sociocultural schema for status, then, would seem to be twofold (figure 1). We have a taken-for-granted but fundamental basic status norm that we learn from experience and pass on to others through our behavior. We combine this deeper, more implicit normative rule with a more explicit, variable, and historically changing set of shared cultural status beliefs that we use to anticipate what others will see as "better," more competent, and valuable in various

situations. It is through the combination of a shared basic status norm and shared status beliefs that people are able to quickly form status hierarchies in the real time of interaction, as evidence shows they do (Bales 1950, 1970).

Understanding status as a sociocultural schema helps us account for some of its distinctive characteristics as a form of inequality. First, because the sociocultural schema approach shows how status hierarchies work through a combination of status beliefs, which typically are shared at the macro level of a broader community or society, and an application of those beliefs at the micro level of social relations among actors, it helps explain the inherently multilevel and cultural nature of status inequality as we observe it around us. Second, in so doing, the sociocultural schema approach clarifies for us the powerful link between status processes and inequality based on social differences and group identity. Finally, it also helps explain the wide range of status rankings in society.

As Sewell (1992) points out, a cultural

Figure 1. A Sociocultural Schema of Status: Societally Specific, Learned and Shared Norms and Beliefs for Organizing Social Relations

Implicit, taken-for-granted norms allocating status
e.g., socially enforced expectations that give status to people who appear valuable in the situation

Status is a process: People do and redo status at multiple levels of society

Institutional/Organizational

Intergroup/Interpersonal

Individual

Explicit, historically changing beliefs about status
e.g., what types of people are more worthy and competent than others

Source: Authors' diagram.

schema or blueprint for organizing social relations in a certain way can be applied permissively to new situations and phenomena beyond the contexts of its origins. It is like acquiring a tool for a certain purpose and then finding new ways to use it. It is because of its cultural nature that people can apply status as a way of coordinating with others in regard to a broad range of social phenomena well beyond the interpersonal group. Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder (2016), for instance, studied how status rankings of law schools develop and become consequential points of reference for both schools and students alike. Shelley Correll and her colleagues (2017) show how, when people must make a decision whose success depends in some degree on the reactions of others, they draw on beliefs about the status of various options to make a choice that will coordinate well with the likely reactions of others. Unfortunately, this can mean that even if a decision-maker thinks, say, that the woman candidate for police chief is as good as or slightly better than the male candidate, the decision-maker may still favor the male candidate as easier to "sell" to others. Indeed, without something like the sociocultural schema approach, the very broad reach of status rankings in advanced industrial societies is much harder to explain.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STATUS FOR INEQUALITY BASED ON GROUP IDENTITY

Understanding status as an inequality process regulated by a deeply learned and shared sociocultural schema helps us see how diverse status phenomena like those between groups in society and those among individuals in groups work together. It also illuminates the processural-cultural nature of status and its basis in the ongoing relationship between the actor and the surrounding group (Grusky, Hall, and Markus 2019). How much does the group value that actor, relative to others, given what counts with the group as important, worthy, and valuable? But for our purposes here, the most important advantage of the sociocultural schema approach is the further insight it provides into the powerful role status plays in creating and maintaining durable patterns of in-

equality in valued life outcomes among identity groups based on social differences such as race, gender, and class background. These insights derive from the way the status beliefs component of the schema shapes people's evaluative reactions and behaviors toward one another to create status advantage, legitimates inequality between groups based on social difference, and fosters a sense of group position and resistance to status threats.

Status Advantage

We have seen that widely held status beliefs are associated with all the social difference groups by which inequality is patterned in the United States. Status beliefs are a central part of the content of the stereotypes of these groups (Fiske et al. 2002). Status beliefs about a social difference such as race, gender, or class, link people in one category of the difference (men, Whites, the middle class) not only greater esteem, but also with cultural presumptions of greater *competence*, especially at what "counts" in society, relative to people in other categories of that difference (women, people of color, the working class) (Berger et al. 1977; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000; Ridgeway et al. 2009; Berger and Webster 2018). Status beliefs suggest that people in a higher-status category of a social difference such as race, gender, or class, are typically "better" and can be expected to be diffusely more competent than those in lower-status categories of the difference.

Status beliefs about a social difference become salient for people in a goal or work-oriented situation when people differ on the characteristic as well as when the social difference is culturally understood to be relevant to the setting's goals, as in a gender-, race-, or class-typed setting (Berger and Webster 2018). When implicitly salient in a setting, status beliefs create a cascading set of subtle biases in people's evaluations and treatments of one another that jointly create *status advantage* (Correll et al. 2017; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). Status advantage is the treatment of people labeled high status by the status beliefs, such as Whites or men, as more valued and competent in the situation than they otherwise would be and favoring them for rewards and opportunities as a consequence. And, as a corresponding

part of status advantage, those labeled low status by the beliefs find themselves treated as less valued, competent, and favored for rewards than they would otherwise be.

Status advantage based on status beliefs about social differences is the foundation of why status matters for broader patterns of inequality in society. With status advantage, a rich, powerful person from a higher-status group, say, a White person, has an added advantage over an equally rich, powerful person from a lower-status group, say, an Asian, Latinx, or African American. At least three types of bias created by status beliefs compound to create status advantage: status bias, legitimacy bias, and associational bias.

Status bias refers to a series of self-fulfilling evaluative competence biases triggered by status beliefs that have been documented by status characteristics and expectations states research (Berger and Webster 2018; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). By this analysis, stereotype threat effects on performance would also fall under the category of status bias (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Schmader and Hall 2014). Implicitly salient status beliefs bias people's expectations for others' relative to their own competence and suitability for authority in a situation. Biased expectations, in turn, have self-fulfilling effects on people's behaviors, performance, evaluations, and outcomes. By subtly shaping one person's behavior toward another, status beliefs create inequalities in assertive versus deferential behavior, actual task performance and evaluations of performance, attributions of ability, influence, and situational rewards between otherwise equal Whites and non-Whites, men and women, and middle- and working-class people (Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Kahlkoff et al. 2020; Melamed et al. 2019; Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway and Fisk 2012; Webster and Driskell 1978).

As people go about their everyday efforts to achieve the valued outcomes by which we judge inequality, such as wealth, health, and positions of power, status bias acting in the social relationships through which they pursue these outcomes shape both their behavior and others' treatment of them. They affect the confidence and energy with which people put themselves forward in a situation and others' willingness to pay attention to their efforts and evaluate them positively. Expecting themselves to be more competent, the status advantaged speak up eagerly while the status disadvantaged hesitate. The same idea or performance seems better to others coming from the status advantaged. In addition, to both others and themselves, the status advantaged seem more the sort for leadership (Berger and Webster 2018; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). Because of the way people use status beliefs to coordinate evaluations, status bias can even cause people to favor a status advantaged candidate, say for hiring, promotion, or school admission, over a similar or slightly more qualified status disadvantaged candidate if they think the status advantaged candidate will be more readily accepted by others in the situation (Correll et al. 2017). In these ways, status bias, acting through the many goal-oriented encounters that take place in consequential contexts such as the workplace, schools, government or health organizations subtly, but systematically, direct people from higher-status groups toward more valued resources and positions of power than otherwise similar people from lower status groups.

In addition to status bias, status advantage is also fostered by *legitimacy bias*, which is the tendency to treat people from more privileged, higher-status groups as more legitimate occupants of high-status positions of authority in groups and organizations (Berger et al. 1998). Legitimacy matters for people in leadership roles because it affects their ability to act authoritatively and expect compliance (Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway 2006; Zelditch 2018). Experimental evidence shows, for instance, that people from lower-status groups who attain a leader role on skill-based merit nevertheless experience more resistance and less compliance from those they lead than those from higher-status groups in the same position (Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994). When a distinguished-looking White man is named to lead a government task force, his power and influence is bolstered by the fact that he looks "right" for the role in a way that a Latinx woman in the same role does not.

Legitimacy bias is behind the resistive, back-

lash reaction that women and African American men sometimes experience when they try to act dominant in a leadership setting (Brescoll, Okimoto, and Vial 2018; Livingston, Rosette, and Washington 2012; Rudman et al. 2012; Williams and Tiedens 2016). When a person from a lower status group (a woman or person of color) acts "too dominant," it implicitly challenges the accepted status hierarchy reflected in status beliefs about the difference (Rudman et al. 2012). Those present from the more status-advantaged groups (men or Whites) frequently react with hostility to the status threat that undercuts the status disadvantaged leader's ability to succeed and rise to positions of greater power. Further, if a leader from a status disadvantaged group does make a mistake, it is often criticized more severely than a similar mistake by a leader whose legitimacy is bolstered by a privileged status group background (Rosette and Livingston 2012).

Finally, status beliefs about social difference groups also create *associational preference bias* that further contributes to status advantage. Status spreads through association among both individuals and organizations (Hysom 2009; Poldolny 2005; Thye 2000). Because the status of those you associate with affects your status, status beliefs bias people's associational preferences toward higher-status others, especially in work or goal-oriented settings. Status beliefs intensify in-group preferences on the part of those from higher-status groups who see every reason to prefer their own for network ties, recommendations, and information about new opportunities (Rivera 2015). For those from lower-status groups, status-driven preference biases undercut solidarity as they are torn between networking with higher-status people to improve their opportunities and supporting their in-group (Cabrera and Thomas-Hunt 2007; Duguid, Lloyd, and Tolbert 2012; Krysan et al. 2009; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

The biases that together make up status advantage are rarely noticed by those involved as they happen. They take place through many small behaviors, judgments, and responses among individuals as they carry out their efforts to achieve the valued outcomes they seek, a job, a promotion, an educational degree,

good health care. Here again, we see the processural aspect of status inequality as something we continually do in our goal-oriented social relations. The effect of any one of these biases in a given work- or goal-oriented encounter can be large, but most often is small. But over the many such encounters taking place in consequential environments, the effect of these biases accumulates (Botelho and Abraham 2017; Korver-Glenn 2018). Together, they silently but systematically steer people from higher-status groups—Whites, men, the middle class—toward positions of greater resources and power while constraining and interrupting the progress of those from lower status groups.

Through the process of status advantage, which we argue results from people's everyday reliance on the status schema to manage their interdependent, goal-oriented efforts, status functions as an independent force in the maintenance of inequality in power and wealth between social difference groups such as race, gender, and class background. This is the foundation of status's significance as an inequality process over and above power and wealth.

Two additional aspects of that significance are worth pointing out. First, because status beliefs work their effects through multiple small, mostly unremarked biases, the effect for participants in the situations is that those from status-advantaged groups are simply revealed to be "better," more competent and valuable, for the work at hand. This aspect of status advantage, that people rarely see the way that they participate in its production, is how status processes legitimate advantage on the basis of merit in a meritocratic society (Ridgeway 2014). In this manner, status-based inequality based on social difference interpenetrates ostensibly meritocratic institutions.

Second, notice that status creates advantages for some types of people relative to others based only on those people's group identities. That is, status advantages people from high-status groups over those who are just as accomplished but from a lower status group. A job candidate's blinded résumé shows a record of accomplishment. In the interview, however, where the candidate's group identities become apparent, she is clearly also an African Ameri-

can woman with a working-class accent. Or he is a White man with a smooth upper-middle-class manner. By advantaging people based on their status-valued social differences alone, status gives inequalities based on social differences such as race, gender, and class background an endogenous capacity to reproduce themselves independent of the accomplishments or other attributes of the people with these identities (Ridgeway 2011, 2019). This further suggests that to overcome inequality based on social differences, status processes must be taken into account.

Sense of Group Position and Status Threat as a Political Motive

As we have seen, status, including that attached to social identity groups, has a public character in that the arena in which it is supported or contested is in the eyes of others. The position of one's social identity groups in the surrounding society's status rankings is known to all both through common-knowledge status beliefs and the everyday status and deference behaviors observed by all who are driven by these beliefs. Status beliefs also function as public, legitimating ideologies for these observed inequalities in life outcomes by linking presumptions of greater competence with people in some social difference groups but not with people from others. Status beliefs give people in higher-status social groups few reasons to doubt that they have fairly won their relative advantages. Together, the public and legitimating effects of status beliefs create for people what Herbert Blumer (1958) called a *sense of group position*, a sense of the deserved public dignity due to people of their group relative to those ranked as lower in status.

A sense of group position motivates people to react with anger and even aggression not just to threats to their personal status in an interpersonal context, but to perceived threats to the status of their social identity group relative to other groups, in the public arena, including media representations and public policies (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999). Examples include challenges to policies that favor a lower-status group over a higher one, such as loans targeted to Black farmers rather than White farmers. Studies show, for instance, that highlighting

for Whites changing racial dynamics that will eventually make Whites a racial minority evoked status threat in them and led them to endorse more conservative political ideologies as well as oppose welfare programs seen to benefit non-Whites (Craig and Richeson 2014; Wetts and Willer 2018).

As we saw at the outset, status threats evoked by the growing cultural dominance of urban elites who are perceived as disparaging rural and working-class whites as well as the greater political prominence of women and racial minorities has fueled political support for political movements like the Tea Party and iconoclastic candidates such as Donald Trump (Cramer 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018). Studies of these effects suggest that it is not those at the very top of the societal status hierarchy, such as upper-class White men, nor those at the bottom, such as lower-class people of color, who have been the most politically reactive to status threats to their group identities. Rather, in recent events, it has been people in the threatened middle or lower middle of the societal status hierarchy who have reacted most strongly. These are people who have felt that their respectable position as White, hard-working, Main Street Americans has been threatened by changing demographics and cultural and political representations that appear to favor previously lower-status groups above them (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Vance 2016). By fostering political resistance to social, economic, and political changes that challenge the established status hierarchies among social groups, the sense of group position created by status processes is a second way that these processes independently and significantly contribute to inequality in life outcomes based on group identity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To make sense of the interactional, processual, and yet inherently multilevel nature of status, we proposed that status is best understood as a sociocultural schema that people use to manage situations in which they are cooperatively interdependent with one another to achieve valued goals but competitively interdependent to maximize their personal outcomes from the collective effort. Status is everywhere in social

life partly because such situations are fundamental to the human condition. But if status is a cultural invention to manage a fundamental tension in the human condition, is it likely that people will ever stop doing and redoing status in one work or goal-oriented situation after another? Probably not. Indeed, widespread evidence shows that people's sense of how much they are valued relative to others in the eyes of their group or community is and will probably remain a powerful motivating force in their behavior across social spheres (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015).

If the everyday doing of status is not going away, then we must take status processes into account and consider how to address their effects if we want to create more egalitarian societies. This is especially the case if we seek a society in which social differences like race or gender are no longer powerful, independent determinants of unequal life outcomes. Status may be an ancient and deeply rooted form of inequality but it is nevertheless cultural and therefore not beyond our control. Although we may never undo status inequality altogether, we can undo its most pernicious effects by undermining the status beliefs embedded in widespread stereotypes of major social groups. It is these status beliefs that link social groups to greater or lesser worthiness and competence and by doing so, transform the everyday doing and redoing of status into the production and maintenance of durable patterns of inequality between these groups.

As cultural beliefs, status beliefs about social groups have to be widely held in a population to have effect. The assumption that status beliefs are what "most people" think is what makes them a basis by which people across multiple social encounters implicitly coordinate their doing and redoing of status. Evidence shows that disrupting the appearance of consensuality and validity that supports status beliefs reduces people's tendency to act on them in their social encounters (Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Seachrist and Stangor 2001). This suggests that changing material circumstances and persistent social and political efforts can create growing public challenges to our most pernicious status beliefs such as those about race, gender, and class background. And, with

growing public challenges, even if these spark status threat and resistance, the appearance of consensuality nevertheless erodes. And, as it erodes, the power of these status beliefs to organize local status hierarchies narrows in range and declines. We used to have widely held, devaluing status beliefs about some White ethnic groups, such as the Irish, for instance, but these beliefs lost consensuality and dissipated in effect. Social change is possible, then, but will not happen without sustained effort.

A LOOK AHEAD TO THE ARTICLES

In the sixteen articles that make up this double issue, social scientists from several disciplines take a new look at the nature and significance of status as an inequality process.

We organize them into three categories, each addressing different aspects of the questions of what is status and why does it matter for inequality. The first section features articles that define status as a fundamental form of equality that shapes broad institutional and interactional patterns of inequality and that also functions as a powerful motive at the individual level. Poulomi Chakrabarti begins the double issue with an article titled "Status and Development: How Social Hierarchy Undermines Well-Being," in which she synthesizes literature from multiple disciplines to compare the legacy of slavery in the United States and the caste system in India to illustrate how status plays a powerful and unacknowledged role in both development and redistributive politics. Tali Mendelberg in "Status, Symbols, and Politics: A Theory of Symbolic Status Politics" maintains that status has been seriously undertheorized in politics; she makes the compelling case that government is an official authority for the allocation of status, and as such almost all important political events, issues, movements, and laws arise as groups seek to gain or maintain their status. Biko Koenig in "Politicizing Status Loss Among Trump Supporters in 2020" agrees that status is fundamental in politics and based on interviews argues that Trump supporters were mobilized by "identity entrepreneurs" who sold the idea that status loss was a result of the Democratic Party's rejection of working-class values—hard work, manual

occupations, small-town family-centric culture.

In "The Architecture of Status Hierarchies: Variations in Structure and Why They Matter for Inequality," Fabien Accominotti, Freda Lynn, and Michael Sauder direct our attention to the structure, or "architectural features" of status hierarchies themselves. They show how these features can differ in ways that exacerbate the inequality in rewards that the status hierarchy distributes, affecting inequality based on power and resources as well as status. The relation between status inequality and inequality based on resources is also the theme of Kevin Leicht's "Inequality and the Status Window: Inequality, Conflict, and the Salience of Status Differences in Conflicts over Resources." He introduces the idea of the status window in which people transform their sense of resource differences in society into a status distinction between those with "more" than them and those with "less" than them, which blinds them to the further reaches of resource inequality. Especially in highly unequal societies, narrow status windows increase the salience of status differences in social conflict to the neglect of resource differences. In "To Forgive Is Devine? Morality and the Status Value of Intergroup Revenge and Forgiveness," Stephen Benard, Long Doan, D. Adam Nicholson, Emily Meanwell, Eric L. Wright, and Peter Lista explore both the fundamental nature of what status is based on and the role it plays in intergroup conflict. They examine the circumstances under which not just perceived competence but also the perceived morality of a group member's actions of forgiveness or revenge toward the other group functions as a basis for status in their own group.

The second section includes articles highlighting the relational, cultural, and multilevel nature of status and revealing that implicit norms for allocating status are shared, enacted, and reinforced by people in both high- and low-status positions. Hilary J. Holbrow, in "When All Assistants Are Women, Are All Women Assistants? Gender Inequality and the Gender Composition of Support Roles," demonstrates that changing the link between women and low-status positions is as or more important for improving pay equity and the status of women in organizational culture than is bringing women into managerial positions. Natasha Quadlin in her article "Do Perceptions of Privilege Enhance—or Impede—Perceptions of Intelligence? Evidence from a National Survey Experiment" finds that despite scholarly criticism of meritocracy and the growing awareness of the degree to which educational success can be purchased, a nationally representative study reveals that public opinion still holds that educational credentials are indicative of a person's intelligence.

E. K. Maloney, Kimberly B. Rogers, and Lynn Smith-Lovin in their article "Status as Deference: Cultural Meaning as a Source of Occupational Behavior" argue that we need a more relational measure of occupational status that captures the extent to which the cultural meanings associated with a given set of occupations imply voluntary deference to people in another set of occupations. They use affect control theory and data measuring the cultural meanings of occupations to explore culturally expected deference relations among classes of occupations. Lauren Valentino's "Status Lenses: Mapping Hierarchy and Consensus in Status Beliefs" introduces the concept of *status lenses* to reflect how flat or hierarchical the status order is and how much a given group agrees or disagrees about that order, finding that people use different status lenses depending on their proximity to traditional centers of power in the United States.

The third and final group of articles in this double issue illuminates that status is a process that people do and redo through their social relations, that status beliefs (such as about race, gender, or class) systematically bias outcomes, and that the effects of these biased outcomes accumulate over multiple social relations. Using in-depth interviews with very wealthy White women (median net worth $16.6 million), Annette Lareau in "Downplaying Themselves, Upholding Men's Status: Women's Deference to Men in Wealthy Families" finds that women perform an abdication of interest and expertise in financial matters, revealing what she calls the "stickiness" of gender in shaping family dynamics and maintaining implicit status norms. In "Racial and Ethnic Status Distinctions and Discrimination: The Effects of

Prior Contact and Group Interaction," Bianca Manago, Jane Sell, and Carla Goar tackle the doing of racial status in two experiments testing techniques from intergroup contact and status characteristics theory for interrupting the formation of status hierarchies based on race in work groups. The experiments, which involved Black-White and Mexican American–White work groups that met multiple times, find that it is necessary to alter status-biased perceptions of competence, not just reduce intergroup anxiety, to reduce racial inequality in influence.

Mesmin Destin, Régine Debrosse, Michelle Rheinschmidt-Same, and Jennifer A. Richeson in their article "Psychological Challenges and Social Support That Shape the Pursuit of Socioeconomic Mobility" examine status uncertainty and the doing of status among college students, finding that status uncertainty can have negative consequences for achievement and well-being, and that social support may provide some buffer against these negative outcomes.

In "'But the Fellows Are Simply Diversity Hires!' How Organizational Contexts Influence Status Beliefs," Sandra Portocarrero and James Carter show how the dynamics of status and race shift over organizational contexts in their study of the fates of Pickering Fellows as they take up careers in the U.S. Department of State. Although the fellowships bring prestige to the winners in college, in the State Department workplace, the fellowships mark them (inaccurately) as "diversity hires," undercutting their perceived competence and status in the workplace.

In a different institutional context but one also consequential for individual careers, Kevin Nazar, Roberta Spalter-Roth, and James C. Witte in "Who Gets Accepted and Who Gets Rejected? Status in the Production of Social Science" examine the impact of race and gender on the peer review process that leads to publication in the *American Sociological Review*, a high-status, flagship journal of an academic discipline. Their unique data set includes not only the race and gender of authors and articles accepted for publication in the journal over several years, but also all those articles that were submitted but rejected. Finally, Lehn M. Benjamin in "How Helping Can Reinforce or Attenuate Status Inequalities: The Case of Nonprofit Organizations" highlights how status is maintained in helping exchanges between staff and participants in nonprofit organizations (such as those for addiction, unemployment, homelessness), observing the effects on participants of three status attenuation practices—sharing control, establishing commonalities, and questioning causes, and comparing them with three status maintenance strategies—asserting control, reinforcing differences, and assuming causes.

As the collection of articles in this double issue demonstrates, we are gaining increasing insight into what status is, how it operates, and what its consequences are for unequal life outcomes. The next great challenge we face as researchers is to learn to use what we know about status processes to more effectively interrupt durable patterns of inequality based on social differences among people in society.

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PART I

Status Is a Fundamental and Distinctive Dimension of Inequality

Status and Development: How Social Hierarchy Undermines Well-Being

POULOMI CHAKRABARTI

Although social status has been shown to be a fundamental motive for individuals, theories of development have largely overlooked the role of status in shaping economic and social outcomes. In tracing the historical roots of social hierarchy through the cases of race, colonialism, and caste, this article outlines the specific mechanisms through which status inequality exacerbates economic disparity between groups and challenges redistributive politics. Whereas mainstream scholarship on identity has focused on cultural representation, I argue that status is fundamentally tied to economic systems and connects cultural injustice to economic exploitation. I propose that representation of low-status groups in public institutions can reduce the real and imagined social distance between groups, which can in turn have positive implications for redistributive politics.

Keywords: status; development, redistribution, inequality, ethnic politics, discrimination

We are at a unique historical moment. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is the largest social movement in American history. What might have been considered unimaginable a few years ago, mainstream businesses proudly endorse the BLM sign on their storefronts and websites. At the same time, the rise of the Alt-Right and the attack on the U.S. Capitol has few historical precedents. A Confederate battle flag was displayed inside the Capitol for the first time. These paradoxes are not just an American phenomenon. The Donald Trump presidency came months after Brexit, motivated by the fear of immigration and globalization (Freedman 2020). Working-class voters in the West have steadily shifted away from Left parties over the last few decades as anti-immigration movements have gained strength (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021). Right-wing populism is on the rise even in developing countries, as seen in Brazil, Bolivia, and India, reflecting backlash against socialist policies that empowered marginalized groups (Heller 2020). At the other end of the political spectrum, mobiliza-

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tions for the "struggle for recognition" under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, and race have become the paradigmatic form of social movements since the end of the twentieth century (Fraser 1995). The desire for status has been shown to be a fundamental and independent motive for people that cannot be reduced to other powerful incentives (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015). Yet theories of development largely overlook the role of status in shaping economic and social outcomes.

One of the reasons for this oversight is the compartmentalization of research on inequality across social sciences (Jackman 1994). The cultural and linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities has led scholars to focus on the politics of representation, culture, and identity, but in the process, bracketing the underlying concerns of distribution of material resources across groups. This duality in symbolic and material deprivation has generated a debate between what Nancy Fraser calls the "politics of redistribution" versus the "politics of recognition" (1995). The politics of redistribution, she argues, is rooted in the political-economic structure of the society, whereas the politics of recognition relates to social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Research in political science, sociology, and economics that use social group as a unit of analysis, on the other hand, have engaged with themes of exploitation and redistribution, but without linking them to identity and recognition explicitly. Although the core idea of recognition has a wider appeal,[1] the mainstream scholarship on multiculturalism frames recognition as largely a cultural issue (Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1995). This may translate to recognizing the cultural rights of minorities, through recognition of their language in government, school curriculum, and so on.

But because of the legacies of caste, slavery, colonialism, or apartheid, some groups find themselves at the bottom of both the cultural and economic hierarchy. Blacks in the United States and Dalits in India are more likely to be employed in low-paying and low-status occupations.[2] Moreover, outside North America and Europe, low-status groups are not necessarily minorities. In several countries in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa, indigenous groups, lower castes, and black and colored people have been historically marginalized despite being demographic majorities. The overlap between class and ethnicity in these societies is not a coincidence. Most identity-based movements grapple with questions of recognition. I argue, though, that status is fundamentally tied to the economic structure of the society. Status connects cultural injustice with economic exploitation.

This article draws on research across social sciences and humanities to examine the implications of social status on human development and redistributive politics. I take a global and interdisciplinary theoretical approach to identify commonalities across types of social hierarchies, focusing in particular on race, colonialism, and caste. By tracing the historical roots of status in hierarchical societies, I show that contemporary beliefs about low-status groups are rooted in elaborate ideologies that questioned their capacity for reason. Ideologies like scientific racism and civilizational progress dehumanized low-status groups and provided the moral justification for their subjugation. Even after institutions like slavery and untouchability are outlawed, the beliefs that legitimized social hierarchies continue to endure.

I argue that status is based on widely shared beliefs about the innate differences in the ability and worth of different groups. Since these beliefs are endorsed by members of both the dominant and marginal groups, it contributes to the stability of exploitative social systems. Status exacerbates economic inequality between groups through three distinction mechanisms—by providing the implicit intellectual justification discrimination, by shaping expectations of self-worth, which results in self-discrimination, and through exclusionary social networks and institutions. A robust welfare

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1. Multiculturalism advocates for group-based rights within the framework of liberalism. Charles Taylor (1994) argues that equality does not require identical treatment across social groups, but the ability to accommodate diverse needs.

2. Dalits are castes previously considered untouchable.

state can mitigate the effects of social exclusion, but status inequality also influences redistributive politics. The two major factors associated with poor public goods provision—economic inequality and segregation between groups—are rooted in status differentials in hierarchical societies. The social distance between groups generates structural barriers for forging cross-class alliances that is needed for redistributive politics.

How can status inequality be reduced? I depart from the mainstream scholarship on identity that valorizes cultural representation. Symbolic representation, I argue, is endogenous to political representation and suggest that the transformation of the social bases of power can potentially reduce social hierarchy by changing the norms of intergroup behavior, weakening elite patronage networks, and improving the accessibility and legitimacy of public institutions. Over the long term, these processes reduce the real and imagined social distance between groups, which in turn generate conditions for redistributive politics. Although this article is largely a theory-building exercise, I draw on the experience of the United States and India. The legacy of slavery in the United States, and of colonialism and the caste system in India, makes these cases particularly useful in understanding the role of social status in development.

DEHUMANIZATION AND THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF STATUS

Status has been defined as "a comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of social esteem, honor, and respect accorded to them" (Ridgeway 2019, 1). Status rankings relate to social identity groups such as gender, race, and class, as well as objects and organizations, occupations, and consumer products. In this article, I focus on social hier-

archy due to ethnic identity. Ethnicity refers to descent-based attributes that are acquired genetically or through cultural and historical inheritance (Chandra 2006).[3] This includes group identities such as race, language, religion, tribe, and caste.

Scholars of ethnic politics distinguish between two types of multiethnic societies—*ranked* and unranked (Horowitz 1985). In ranked ethnic systems, class and ethnicity coincide, that is, Groups A and B are stratified by class (see figure 1). Such societies are marked by clearly understood conceptions of superordinate or dominant and subordinate or marginal groups. The distinction between dominant and marginal groups is less clear in unranked societies (that is, groups A and B are parallel). The two ethnic systems can exist within the same society. In India, for example, Hindus and Muslims are unranked but the caste system within the Hindus society is ranked. In Canada, the relation between Anglophones and Francophones can be conceptualized as unranked, but the legacy of settler-colonialism makes the relations between indigenous groups and European-Canadians ranked. Donald Horowitz (1985) argues that ranked societies can be identified by three characteristics: lack of an acknowledged upper class, lack of autonomous leadership, and ritualized modes of expressing lower status or contamination of the dominant group.[4] Ranked and unranked systems are conceptualized as ideal types. The relation between ethnic groups is complex and dynamic. Historically, social hierarchies have transformed in many places over time. But social status has important implications for contemporary political and economic outcomes in ranked or hierarchical societies.[5]

I argue that the idea of *dehumanization* is key to understanding the nature of intergroup rela-

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3. Descent-based attributes are defined by two properties—constrained change and visibility (Chandra 2006). Relative to other social identities, such as class, ethnic categories are less malleable in the short term. A black person, for example, can overcome the class barrier, but norms related to ethnicity are harder to change during a person's lifetime.

4. He suggests that unranked ethnic systems are produced through migration and that ranked systems are a result of conquest or capture.

5. I use the terms *ranked* and *hierarchical, low-status* and *marginal,* and *high-status* and *dominant* interchangeably.

Figure 1. Ranked versus Unranked Societies
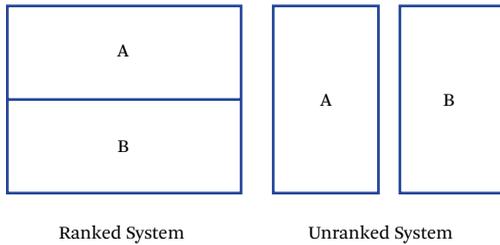
Source: Author's tabulation.

tions in both ranked and unranked societies. Herbert Kelman (1973, 48–49) argues that to perceive a person as fully human, one needs to recognize their identity and their community, that is we have to perceive a person as an "individual, independent, and distinguishable from others, capable of making decisions based on his own goals" who is "part of an interconnected network of individuals, who care for each other." Dehumanization is a psychological process that deprives a person of identity and community. When people's humanity is stripped away, they only appear human on the surface, but are devoid of the virtues of what it means to be human. Recent studies draw a distinction between blatant and subtle forms of dehumanization and find that people tend to attribute more emotions and traits associated with full humanity to members of their in-group (Kteily and Landry 2022).[6] This process of "Othering" makes violence and subjugation morally acceptable by excluding certain types of people from the system of moral rights and obligations that binds humankind together (Smith 2011). Dehumanization is a tool to justify both mass violence and social hierarchy, but the mechanism through which it operates seems to be different for unranked and ranked groups.

Unranked groups may be disliked and mis-

trusted, but they are not denied *prestige*. These groups reaffirm the superiority of their own culture, even while conceding limited spheres of cultural superiority to other groups (Horowitz 1985). In the case of genocide and war, the "Other" is generally depicted as a dangerous but *rational* parasite. Although by no means the only one, the Holocaust is perhaps the single most destructive event in recent history that relied on an identity-based ideology to justify the killing of millions of people. The Nazis labeled Jewish people as Untermenschen or "subhumans" that posed a deadly threat to humanity. The notorious propaganda film, *Der Ewige Jude* or *The Eternal Jew*, depicted them as an undifferentiated swarm of rats. The Jews were believed to be powerful and cunning. The Nazis feared that they would use their control over the national governments of Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to destroy the Aryan race. But before they were forced into camps, the Nazis systematically excluded and humiliated Jewish people—their businesses were boycotted, they were barred from the civil service, or Berufsbeamtengesetz. The Nazi public culture was constructed on the mantra that "Not every being with a human face is human" (Koonz 2003, cited in Smith 2011). Depriving Jews of their humanity made it possible to reduce public sympathy for their persecution. Dehumanization enables elites to orchestrate mass violence through the indifference of observers (Rai, Valdesolo, and Graham 2017).[7]

In the case of ranked systems, status hierarchy is maintained through norms of intergroup interaction and social segregation. These norms serve as a tool to dehumanize marginal groups and, in the process, internalizes hierarchy in the minds of members of both the dominant and marginal groups. Historically, intergroup norms were enforced through restrictions on sex, marriage, social contact, and

6. This includes agency or capacity to think and act, and experience or capacity to feel (Kteily and Landry 2022).

7. Tage Rai, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Jesse Graham (2017) draw a distinction between instrumental and moral violence. They demonstrate that dehumanization increases violence committed for instrumental reasons by making people indifferent to the victims' suffering. Morally motivated perpetrators, by contrast, humanize victims to justify violence against them. For example, the mechanism of neglect, caused by the dehumanization of Muslims, may allow for public support or indifference for the ban against immigration from several Muslims countries in the United States. A Muslim terrorist, in contrast, may be conceptualized as completely human and instead invites the impulse of moral outrage.

spatial separation of occupation and residence (Horowitz 1985). Low-status groups are often depicted as dirty. Dalits in India, for example, were considered "polluting." The Burakumin in Japan, called Eta earlier, means "full of filth." Samal Luwaan in the southern Philippines comes from the word *luwaan,* which means "that which was spat out" or "rejected by God." B. R. Ambedkar, India's most prominent Dalit leader and the principal architect of its constitution, described the caste system as an "ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt" (Jaffrelot 2003, 20). The rate of inter-caste marriages in India, even as recently as 2011, was less than 6 percent (Ray, Roy Chaudhuri, and Sahai 2020).

While the "Other" is also represented as subhuman, in contrast to unranked societies, low-status groups are not believed to be rational or necessarily threatening. In the case of race, for example, "scientific theories" of racial difference constructed by Enlightenment thinkers used a combination of biblical concepts and prevalent medical knowledge on anatomy to construct hierarchical models of mankind. Caucasians were at the top of the racial hierarchy because of their perceived capacity for reason and virtue. East Asians or "Mongolians" were a step lower, but still capable of civilization. African races were believed to be "animal-like," possessing thick nerves, and hence lacking the capacity for reason or experiencing pain and emotion. The words "*race*" and "*species*" were interchangeable during this period (Boyle 2010). These beliefs were supported by racial theories by physical anthropologists from mid-nineteenth century until World War I. Samuel Morton, known as the father of scientific racism, studied human skulls to develop a theory of human races. Shortly before the theory of evolution by Darwin and long before the discovery of DNA and the human genome that has proved that the concept of race has no genetic basis, theories of race were consumed as established scientific fact and common knowledge (Kolbert 2018).

Violence has been and may be used to enforce hierarchy in ranked systems, but the central tenet of social hierarchy is the belief about difference in intellectual capacity across groups. This belief served as the moral justification for slavery and subjecthood. Thomas Jefferson, a politician, philosopher, scientist, and a proponent of individual rights, was also a slave owner. In "Notes on the State of Virginia," Jefferson argues that blackness is inherent and comes "from the color of the blood," which makes them "inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind" (Finkelman 2012). His ideas of equality as reflected in the Declaration of Independence are at odds with his view of slavery, but Jefferson was by no means an exception. The U.S. Supreme Court, in its judgment of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857, noted, "[Negroes] had. . .been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect"(quoted in Darby 2009, 109). This opinion was at the time regarded as indisputable. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, leading thinkers continued to assert that black people were a lower race that was incapable of reason.

The implications of racial theories and the apparent contradictions between liberalism and servitude are further reflected in justifications of colonialism. By the end of the eighteenth century, Britain had begun to consider itself a democracy. Yet the idea of the empire not only was endorsed by the British state, but also found legitimacy from leading liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and Lord Macaulay. The idea of race, though not always overt in rhetoric, manifested itself through the metaphor of infancy to describe the colonies. Uday Mehta (1999) argues that these thinkers believed that nonwhite colonies were primitive societies and lacked the maturity for self-governance. This belief rested on the notion of "progress" as societies transition from barbarism to civilization. Colonialism was hence seen as a positive, and even a moral intervention to bring the rest of the world at par with the West through the spread of modern institutions and education. Lord Macaulay, for instance, described the goals of English education in India as a tool for this civilizing mission: "We must at present do our best to form a . . . class of persons, Indians in blood and color, but English in taste, in opin-

ions, in morals, and in intellect" (quoted in Mehta 1999, 15).[8] Liberal ideas of equality hence developed alongside nonrecognition of other cultures. John Stuart Mill argued that "despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with *barbarians*, provided the end be their *improvement*." (Mill 1865, 6, emphasis added).

The belief linking the capacity for reason to slavery is not unique to modernity or the West. Theories of democracy, interestingly, precede theories of equality. Martha Nussbaum (2000) argues that Aristotle's conception of *politeia* is closer to the democratic principles than any other ancient form of government because it involves an idea of "free and equal citizens," but not everyone was considered fit to be a "citizen." Aristotle believed that some people— women, manual laborers, farmers, and sailors—were inherently incapable of reason and therefore qualified as "natural slaves." The theory of natural slavery remained influential in Christian Europe as well as the Islamic world during the medieval period.[9] Outside the West, the caste system in the Indian subcontinent is an example of social stratification based on occupational segregation.[10] Social inequality and economic exploitation was justified through an elaborate ideology according to which those born into lower castes were being punished for their sins in their past lives (Galanter 1984). Since endogamy led to separation between groups for centuries, it supported the belief that lower castes had inherently less intellectual capacity (Saini 2019).

To summarize, a closer inspection of ranked and unranked societies shows that though most non-coethnics are "Othered," the elements of dehumanization in the two contexts are distinct. Unranked groups are not denied status or prestige. The myths surrounding marginal groups in hierarchical societies are rooted in elaborate ideologies that questioned their capacity for reason. Scientific racism and civilizational progress, for example, dehumanized low-status groups and served as the moral justification for their subjugation. Scholars of racial capitalism have highlighted the role of racist ideology in economic exploitation in transatlantic slavery (Ince 2022), but the link between cultural beliefs about groups and economic occupation extends to all forms of social hierarchy.

WHY STATUS MATTERS FOR ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Globally, ethnic subordination as a way of organizing social relations lost its legitimacy with the spread of liberalism and norms of equality in the twentieth century. Decolonization was the largest scale exercise in self-determination that had reverberations across Western democracies and newly independent countries (Horowitz 1985). With it, the idea of dignity replaced traditional norms of honor. Dignity is based on the premise that all humans are equally worthy of respect (Taylor 1994). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, begins with the "recognition of the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family." Most countries enacted laws against discrimination. In India, untouchability was criminalized in 1949. The practice of eugenics as practiced by the Nazis or the idea that black people do not have souls is not just gruesome and offensive but considered absurd by most people today. Yet ethnic inequality persists. Unequal social systems are surprisingly resilient. Why?

Status offers a useful perspective to uncover the roots of group-based economic inequality. Status is based on widely shared beliefs about the innate differences in the ability and worth of different groups. These beliefs may be traced to, say, theories of scientific racism, patriarchy, caste ideology, or civilizational progress and

8. Travel to client countries at the World Bank (where I worked for a few years) is still referred to as "mission."

9. David Smith (2011) argues that Muslim thinker Ibn Sina and jurist al-Andalusi justified the trans-Saharan slave trade by invoking the idea that some groups are naturally suited for slavery.

10. The caste system divides the Hindu society into the following hierarchical order: Brahmins (priests), Kashatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (workers). Dalits, or former untouchables, were considered outside society.

are shared by members of both dominant and marginal groups. Cecilia Ridgeway (2019) argues that the consensus on status rankings among high- and low-ranking actors is what makes status powerful in shaping social relations. Even after formal legislations dismantle institutions like slavery and untouchability, the beliefs that legitimized these hierarchies continue to endure. Though research on social status is relatively novel in political science, the literature on "system justification theory" (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004) and "social dominance theory" (Sidanius and Pratto 1999) in social psychology shows that status beliefs contribute toward the stability of exploitative social systems. Summarizing the claims of the theory, John Jost, Mahzrin Banaji, and Brian Nosek (2004, 885) note, "hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also by the complicity of members of subordinated groups, many of whom perpetuate inequality through mechanisms such as out-group favoritism."

Some of the most interesting explanations of colonialism are not economic or political, but psychological. In examining British colonization of India, Ashis Nandy (1983) argues that technological and military might alone cannot explain Britain's occupation over a continent-sized polity. British rule was based on an ideological consensus where Indians saw the *Raj* as an agent of progress. Cultural representation of colonized subjects in metropolitan discourses is relevant to understand the construction of subjecthood (Mehta 1999; Satia 2020). The "civilizational mission" is at the heart of colonialism. Nandy (1983, xvi) notes that, "Modern oppression is a battle between dehumanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected onto their subjects." The logic of system justification extends to several forms of social hierarchy. Studies repeatedly find that low-income groups are rarely more likely than high-income groups to support economic redistribution (Fong 2001). Rebellion is surprisingly rare in human history. Howard Zinn (2014, 16, emphasis added), ar-

gues, "we have infinitely more instances of forbearance to exploitation, and submission to authority, than we have examples of revolt. . . What we should be most concerned about is not some natural tendency towards violent uprising, but rather the inclination of people, faced with an overwhelming environment, to *submit* to it."

Status beliefs dictate social relations, and in the process, reinforce inequality between groups in three ways—societal discrimination, self-discrimination, and social networks and institutions. First, status beliefs shape societal perceptions of competence of different groups, hence providing an implicit intellectual justification for discrimination. Discrimination against low-status groups in employment, housing, and the criminal justice system is well documented across different contexts. Recent field experiments demonstrate the causal link between labor market discrimination and ethnicity (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Thorat and Newman 2007). White applicants in the United States, for example, received 23 percent more callbacks than black applicants with the same resumé (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

Although not in their original form, remnants of status beliefs continue to shape individual behavior and attitudes. Scientific racism has long been discarded but a recent study finds that black Americans are undertreated for pain because white medical students and residents hold false beliefs about biological differences between black and white people—that black people's skin is thicker and their blood coagulates more quickly (Hoffman et al. 2016). Maya Dusenbery (2018) finds that women's pain is taken less seriously by the medical community, not just because of inadequate research on conditions that disproportionally affect women, but also because of viewing women as prone to "hysteria" and hence not believing that their pain is real. In another study Sarah Cotterill and her colleagues (2014) find that belief in the ideology of karma and caste—that being born into a lower-caste family is a reflection of sins in the previous life—has a strong and independent effect on individual support for caste-based inequality and opposition to a host of affirmative action policies in India, even

after accounting for generalized prejudice.[11] It should therefore not be surprising that almost 30 percent of the respondents in a major nation-wide survey, including the educated urban middle class, practice forms of untouchability in their homes (Thorat and Joshi 2015). In another survey, 40 percent of respondents in the capital city of Delhi supported laws against inter-caste marriage, an institution seen as threatening to upper-caste dominance (Coffey et al. 2018).

Second, status beliefs operate at a social-psychological level by shaping an individual's expectations of self-worth, which in turn affects their behavior. Based on the Hegelian idea of Anerkennung that identity is constructed dialogically, recognition from others is essential to the development of a sense of self. Nonrecognition, Charles Taylor (1994) argues, can inflict its victims with crippling self-hatred. Political theorists point to the unique dichotomy of lack of recognition, by marking out members of marginalized groups as stereotypes and rendering them invisible at the same time. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, described this state as "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (quoted in Lukes 1997). This "double consciousness" (which Gramsci also notes) leads members of low-status groups to conform to their stereotype in conscious and subconscious ways. The expectation of self-worth in turn influences their behavior and performance.

In recent years, this philosophical claim has found empirical support through experiments on identity-based stereotypes. In what became a landmark study, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995) find that differences in performance between black and white participants in scholastic aptitude tests resulted from participants' fear that they might conform to a negative stereotype about their group, which in turn reduced their performance. Women perform worse in math when reminded of their gender (Steele and Ambady 2006), black athletes underperform when the task is framed as "sports intelligence" and the performance of white athletes drops when it is framed as "natural ability" (Stone et al. 1999). Field experiments in India show that publicly revealing the caste of middle-school boys reduces the performance of lower-caste individuals (Hoff and Pandey 2006).

Finally, status beliefs have enduring effects through social networks and institutions, long after laws against discrimination are enacted. This bias extends to social networks in employment, residential patterns, marriage, and friendships, which further contributes to group-based inequality (Ridgeway 2014). Further, exclusionary historical institutions continue to affect present-day political and economic outcomes. Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen (2016) find that counties in the American South that had higher concentration of slaves in 1860 are more likely to be conservative, oppose affirmative action, and express racial resentment and colder feelings toward blacks today, even after accounting for contemporary racial threat. Municipalities that were under slavery in Colombia are associated with higher levels of current day poverty, land inequality, and poorer public goods provision (Acemoglu, García-Jimeno, and Robinson 2012). Similarly, in Brazil Giuliana Pardelli and Alexander Kustov (2022) find that areas with a larger share of Afro-descendants more than a century ago inherited weaker state capacity and continue to experience worse public goods provision as a result.

To summarize, status beliefs contribute to economic inequality between groups, what Charles Tilly (1998) refers to as "durable inequality." He argued that significant differences in "merit" between categories of people, such as black-white, male-female, citizen-foreigner, can be traced to social organization, belief, and enforcement rather than individual differences in attributes, propensities, and performance. Over the long term, the effects of discrimination due to identity, notions of self-worth, and the nature of social networks and

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11. Generalized prejudice refers to negative feelings against a group without an accompanying ideology that justifies it. For example, in the case of this study, generalized prejudice is the belief that lower castes have lower intellectual capacity or are less hard working than other groups (Cotterill et al. 2014).

institutions contributes to the unequal distri-
bution and accumulation of power and re-
sources.

WHY STATUS MATTERS
FOR DEVELOPMENT

Development broadly refers to structural
changes in the economy due to technological
progress whereby agrarian societies become
more industrialized. This shift is expected to
increase economic productivity and the average
material well-being of the population. Typically,
a country's level of development is measured
through the size of its economy or gross domes-
tic product. The field of development was revo-
lutionized with the "capabilities approach" in
the late 1980s in which Amartya Sen and Martha
Nussbaum conceptualize development as the
process to enhance human freedoms through
interconnected goals of economic develop-
ment, social opportunity, and expansion of po-
litical and civil rights (Sen 1999; Nussbaum
2011). Although the theory was designed to in-
fluence policy, its appeal is rooted in its philo-
sophical critique of both utilitarian and liber-
tarian theories that had influenced development
policy until then. In contrast to utilitarian the-
ories, which rely on the total or average well-
being in a society (reflected by GDP), and liber-
tarians, who focus on appropriate procedures
without worrying about whether some people
suffer from systematic deprivation or substan-
tive opportunities, the capabilities approach
argues that the expansion of freedom should
be viewed as both primary end (constitutive
role) and principal means (instrumental role)
of development. Sen argues that development
involves both "the processes that allow free-
dom of action and decisions, and the actual
opportunities that people have, given their per-
sonal and social circumstances" (1999, 17).

The capabilities approach mainstreamed
the principles of the equality of opportunity in
development theory. The normative principles
of this model led to the conception of the Hu-
man Development Index (HDI) by the United
Nations in 1990. HDI ranks the overall well-
being of nations in terms of three indicators in
equal measure—income, performance in
health, and performance in education. The
HDI was strategically designed to measure out-
comes, rather than the source of service provi-
sion, to appeal to thinkers across the ideologi-
cal spectrum. But the role of the state in the
provision of mass education, health care, and
effective financial markets is widely recognized
as important for poverty reduction (Ravallion
2016). But what makes some states more wel-
fare oriented or redistributive?

Our understanding of redistribution comes
from two main strands of literature: the welfare
state, and ethnicity and development. A large
body of work has examined the determinants
of variation in social entitlements across ad-
vanced industrialized countries (Huber, Ragin,
and Stephens 1993; Esping-Andersen 1990; Lu-
ebbert 1991; Rueschemeyer, Huber, and Ste-
phens 1992). Countries in northern Europe are
able to provide generous social benefits to their
citizens irrespective of class, whereas welfare
in the United States is modest and primarily
directed toward the poor. Gosta Esping-
Andersen's *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capital-
ism* is perhaps the most influential theory on
the welfare state. He follows the Polanyian tra-
dition of conceptualizing welfare in terms of its
capacity for "de-commodification," or the de-
gree to which people can meet their living stan-
dards independently of pure market forces
(Esping-Andersen 1990). The strength of the
welfare state, he argues, depends on the role of
cross-class coalitions and historical legacies of
regime institutionalization. Although social de-
mocracies are relatively rare in developing
countries, the role of cross-class coalitions
stands out even under conditions of low in-
come. The consensus among scholars of the
welfare state is that the size, organizational co-
herence, cohesion of the working class, and the
willingness of working-class parties to forge
cross-class political alliances in gaining elec-
toral power are the key determinants of univer-
salistic welfare (Sandbrook et al. 2007).

A second body of work examines the rela-
tionship between ethnicity and public goods
provision. These studies, across developed and
developing countries, consistently find that
ethnic diversity impedes public goods provi-
sion (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Miguel and
Gugerty 2005; Habyarimana et al. 2007). More
diverse cities and regions have been shown to
have greater corruption, worse public health

and education outcomes, and lower levels of voting and civic participation. The negative relationship between social divisions and development has, in fact, been described as the "most powerful hypotheses in political economy" (Banerjee, Iyer, and Somanathan 2005, 639).

Recent research has challenged the influential "diversity-deficit thesis" from two perspectives. The first group of studies demonstrate that *inequality between groups* is a better predictor of public goods outcomes than diversity per se (Baldwin and Huber 2010; Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou 2016). These studies emphasize that the concept of ethnic fractionalization used to measure diversity treats all groups as equivalent. Instead, we should examine how differences in endowments across groups shape redistributive politics.[12] Studies, for example, show that the share of low-status groups in the population is a better indicator of the quality of public goods—homogeneous Afro-descendant municipalities in Brazil and neighborhoods with a higher proportion of lower castes in India have worse public services than do ethnically diverse areas (Kustov and Pardelli 2018; Bharathi, Malghan, and Rahman 2015).[13] The second challenge comes from scholars who argue that *segregation*, rather than diversity, is at fault (Uslaner 2012; Tajima, Samphantharak, and Ostwald 2018; Ejdemyr, Kramon, and Robinson 2018). Simon Ejdemyr, Eric Kramon, and Amanda Robinson (2018) find that the political elite target public goods toward coethnics when ethnic groups are geographically segregated, which in turn increases disparity between groups. Eric Uslaner (2012) argues that segregation breeds mistrust because it isolates groups and exaggerates the degree of difference between them. He shows that diversity and segregation are

only moderately correlated. Segregation is the principal reason behind inequality and lack of social trust.

How is status inequality connected to redistribution? In hierarchical societies, the two factors associated with poor public goods provision—economic disparity and segregation between groups—can be traced to status differentials. As discussed in the previous section, status beliefs contribute to inequality between groups through discrimination and exclusionary networks and institutions. Status inequality also widens the social distance between groups. Historically Dalits were forced to live in the fringes of towns and villages and not permitted to use public spaces. Urbanization and economic development have reduced social hierarchy, but most large cities continue to exhibit high degrees of caste-based segregation (Bharathi, Malghan, and Rahman 2015). Similarly, racial segregation in the United States is a consequence of a long history of segregationist policies like Jim Crow. Fewer than 15 percent of blacks live in areas where blacks make up less than 10 percent of the population and 33 percent live in census tracks that are at least 65 percent black. As black incomes have risen, middle-class blacks have deserted the inner cities, often to segregated suburbs rather than mixed neighborhoods (Uslaner 2012).

From the perspective of redistributive politics, status differentials act as a barrier for effective class-based mobilization. Here scholars draw on theories in social psychology to emphasize the role of social affinity in predicting support for redistribution. The core idea is that individuals identify with another group based on the perceived social distance and relative status of the group in question (Shayo 2009). In the absence of cross-cutting ethnic cleavages, middle-income voters empathize with the

12. I acknowledge that shared culture and enforceable social norms affect cooperation at the community level (Habyarimana et al. 2007), which can in turn shape the production and maintenance of common pool resources (like drainage, irrigation systems, forests, and so on). In most countries, however, the main responsibility of public goods provision rests with the state. Overall, state-society relations should be expected to play a more salient role in redistribution.

13. A related body of work emphasizes the role of historical path-dependent processes of state development. Scholars argue that contemporary levels of ethnic diversity and public goods provision are both a function of slowly evolving state capacity, thus pointing toward potential endogeneity of ethnic diversity (Wimmer 2016; Singh and vom Hau 2016).

poor and support redistributive policies. In contrast, ethnic division within the working class weakens class cohesion and hinders cross-class alliances that are necessary for successful class-based mobilization for redistribution (Rueschemeyer, Huber, and Stephens 1992). Poor high-status individuals, like the white working class in the United States (Cramer 2016; Mutz 2018) and poor Brahmins in India (Suryanarayan 2019), for example, have been shown to vote against their material interests to preserve their ascriptive privilege. Jill Quadagno (1994) attributes the weakness of the American welfare state to status—racial discrimination against blacks in trade unions prevented labor organizing, and neighborhood segregation at the level of community impeded class solidarity. Further, if low-status groups are disproportionately poor, as is generally the case in hierarchical societies, the middle-class majority is less likely to transfer money to people whom they perceive as different from themselves (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Houle 2017). Residents of wealthy white suburbs in the United States, for example, do not see themselves as part of the same moral community as black residents in inner cities. In such cases, the welfare state generates its own system of stratification by attaching stigma to welfare (Esping-Andersen 1990).

In short, the history of ascriptive discrimination in hierarchical societies exacerbates the social distance and inequality between groups, which in turn generates structural barriers for mobilization for redistributive politics. Status inequality is potentially a distinct mechanism affecting the politics of public goods provision that is yet to be systematically explored by scholars of the welfare state. Historical discrimination hence presents a unique paradox: redistribution is necessary to achieve greater equality and to reduce the social distance between groups, but meaningful redistribution is possible only under conditions of some basic levels of social solidarity.

REPRESENTATION AND EGALITARIAN POLITICS

Research on ethnic inequality and economic inequality has generally developed in separate silos. As Ridgeway and Hazel Markus (2022) note in their introduction to this issue, at the macro level, status is assumed to be an outcome of resources and power, and at the micro level, status is seen as a reflection of group identity. Concerns of identity and racism have led social psychologists to explore themes such as prejudice, hate, envy, and shame. Mary Jackman (1994) argues that the underlying assumption of much of the research on prejudice is that ethnic hostility is driven by *lack of information*— ignorance breeds misunderstanding, and misunderstanding breeds hatred. Contact theory, one of the most influential theories in social psychology, argues that increased intergroup contact will reduce prejudice by allowing individuals to update their prior negative stereotype through new information (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Prejudice is hence divorced from the economic structure of the society and conceived as a phenomenon in the mind of an individual from the dominant group (Jackman 1994). Marxist scholars of redistribution, on the other hand, assume that identity is secondary and epiphenomenal—once economic inequality is eliminated, ethnic inequality will automatically fade away. The mainstream Left thought argues that the only way to eliminate inequality is through class conflict; hence the famous slogan in *The Communist Manifesto*, "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" Attention to identity is even seen as harmful because it divides the working class.[14] The distinction between sym-

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14. Frances Piven and Richard Cloward (1979) recall that the severest criticism of black movements in the United States came from the leftist scholars who argued that the movements worsened class divisions and failed to win meaningful economic gains. In South Africa, Saul Dubow (1995) argues that scientific racism was overlooked in part because the Left believed that racial prejudice operated as a disguise for capitalism and apartheid. This allowed South African intellectuals to place the sole responsibility for segregation on Afrikaner nationalism and race was almost wished away in the process. In India, the ideological conflict between Ambedkar and the Communist Party illustrates the inability of the Left to acknowledge humiliation as a distinct form of exploitation. Ambedkar was blamed for dividing the working class and "misleading" the Dalit masses (Teltumbde 2017).

Figure 2. Examples of Symbolic Representation

2a: Statue of B. R. Ambedkar, Parliament
House, New Delhi

2b: Statues of Dalit leaders in Lucknow,
Uttar Pradesh

2c: Portrait of Michelle Obama, National
Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Source: 2a and 2b: Wikimedia Commons 2020 and 2021; 2c: Curry 2018. Photo copyright Benjamin
A. C. Hines. Reprinted with permission.

bolic and material concerns has also domi-
nated the debates in the field of ethnic poli-
tics.[15]

The remedy for cultural injustice is believed
to lie in recognizing and positively valorizing
cultural diversity (Fraser 1995). It calls for sym-
bolic representation or revaluing disrespected
and marginalized identities in the public
sphere by acknowledging their achievements
and struggles. It may take the form of naming
or renaming of public spaces after leaders of
marginal groups as well as removal of symbols
of majority domination. Examples of symbolic
representation include the statue of Ambedkar
in the Indian Parliament (figure 2a). The re-
moval of Confederate monuments in the Amer-

ican South, because of the belief that they glo-
rify white supremacy, can also be conceived as
symbolic representation. Symbolic representa-
tion contributes to the destigmatization of low-
status groups whereby they gain cultural mem-
bership in the political community (Lamont
2018). This approach is consistent with theories
of social change in social psychology that have
emphasized the role of greater contact between
groups in humanizing "the Other," and in the
process, extending the "moral circle" of our sol-
idarity (Bloom 2010; Paluck, Green, and Green
2019). The marginal becomes mainstream
through its representation in the public sphere.
Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's
Cabin*, for example, is attributed to end slavery

15. Theories of ethnic preferences are broadly categorized into two camps—expressive and instrumental. Ex-
pressive theories, rooted in social-psychological models, attribute preference for coethnics to a fundamental
need for self-esteem (Shayo 2009; Horowitz 1985). Instrumental theories discount psychological attachment
to the in-group and instead see coethnics as a means of maximizing material benefits (Chandra 2004; Posner
2005).

in the United States and more recently, popular television shows such as *The Cosby Show* and *Will and Grace* have helped in reducing prejudice against blacks and gay people (Bloom 2010).

Cultural representation seems to offer a solution, but it faces two challenges. First, meta-studies on prejudice show that status beliefs or stereotypes are learned early in life are remarkably resistant to change in the short-to-medium term (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Paluck, Green, and Green 2019). Second and more important, the current discourse on cultural representation does not address the role of political agency in reducing social hierarchy. Symbolic representation can be powerful, but meaningful cultural representation of low-status groups is endogenous to their political power. In India for example, where public spaces have historically been named after upper-caste leaders, the Dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party was able to prioritize the creation of Dalit iconography only after it assumed power in the state of Uttar Pradesh (figure 2b). More than symbolic politics, research across different contexts shows that governments led by marginal groups have supported descriptive representation in state institutions (Fernandez, Koma, and Lee 2018; Postero 2017; Chakrabarti 2019). Existing research has focused on understanding how majority social attitudes can be changed. I propose that directing our attention to the effects of representation of low-status groups in institutions of power can be more fruitful to uncover the sources of egalitarian politics. The transformation of the social bases of power can have important implications for reducing social hierarchy by changing social norms of inter-group behavior, reducing discrimination, weakening elite patronage networks, facilitating claims-making by marginalized citizens, and altering identity-based stereotypes.

First, representation of low-status groups in public institutions can reduce discrimination by changing the social and legal norms of interaction between groups. In India, for instance, untouchability continues to be practiced despite formal legislations in large part because laws against untouchability are rarely enforced. Simon Chauchard (2014), in his study of village politics in the state of Rajasthan, finds that political quotas for Dalits in local government were instrumental in reducing caste-based discrimination. As studies on prejudice predict (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Paluck, Green, and Green 2019), majority beliefs about lower castes remained negative, but he found that villagers understood that Dalits leaders were in a position to enforce antidiscrimination laws and this led to changes in social norms. A growing body of work finds that perception of social norms regarding the appropriate treatment of an out-group is a more powerful predictor of intergroup behavior than individual attitudes toward the group (Paluck 2009, 2012; Dixon et al. 2012). Similarly, research in organizational studies shows that appointing members of minority groups as managers is more effective in advancing African Americans and women relative to individually directed attitude change efforts like diversity training (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006).

Relatedly, social change can be especially challenging if the keepers of public institutions are predominantly from socially dominant groups. Myron Weiner (1991), for example, attributes India's poor performance in mass education to caste bias. He uncovered a widespread belief among upper-caste policymakers that the education system should reinforce the occupational divisions of the caste system—between people who work their "minds" and people who work with their "hands." Although the effects of descriptive representation are mediated by institutional factors such as partisanship, design of representative systems, and party ideology (Dunning and Nilekani 2013; Jensenius 2017; Preuhs 2006), minority representation has been shown to reduce inequality, especially in law enforcement. In the United States, for example, Harris (2020) finds that increase in black judges improved equity in sentencing by reducing a black-white gap in incarceration. Black police officers are five times less likely to use gun force in predominantly black neighborhoods (Hoekstra and Sloan 2022).

Third, the inclusion of low-status groups in the state can weaken long-established elite patronage networks (Witsoe 2013). Greater representation of lower-caste groups in the bureau-

cracy can also support redistribution by breaking down upper-caste networks (Chakrabarti 2021). Revisionist history of political machines in American cities show that the recruitment of Irish, Italian, and Jewish groups in the party system in the early twentieth century was instrumental in reducing the political dominance of Anglo Protestant elites (Bearfield 2009). Although these jobs were no doubt patronage based, the primary purpose of patronage was recognition—"the symbolic and vicarious satisfaction of seeing "one of their own" given prestige, power and income" (Moynihan and Wilson 1964, 296). Such changes in traditional power structures can generate backlash in the short term (Alter and Zürn 2020), but descriptive representation has been shown to increase the overall support for minority leaders by reducing racial threat (Hajnal 2001), and can mitigate racial backlash against minority incorporation in social welfare (Preuhs 2007).

Fourth, from the perspective of low-status groups, descriptive representation can make the state more accessible and improve their responsiveness to public programs. In the United States, black and Latino representation is associated with higher voter turnouts (Rocha et al. 2010; Griffin and Keane 2006), increased institutional legitimacy (Scherer and Curry 2010), and lower levels of political alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003). In South Africa, where white officials continued to incite fear and anger even after apartheid was dismantled, Sergio Fernandez, Samuel Koma, and Hongseok Lee (2018) find that black residents were more likely to trust black officials, which in turn improved policy enforcement. Descriptive representation in local institutions in India has been shown to transform social relations in significant ways by bringing members of traditionally marginalized groups into the formal space in the public sphere (Chauchard 2014; Kruks-Wisner 2018; Rao and Sanyal 2010). This can in turn allow marginalized citizens to make claims on the state and generate demand for public goods (Kruks-Wisner 2018).

Finally, descriptive representation can alter stereotypes and reduce self-reinforcing discrimination by demonstrating that all groups are equally capable of high achievement. Francesca Jensenius's (2017) work on India shows that descriptive representation allows members of low-status groups to gain political experience, which makes them better at mobilizing voters over time. She argues that the importance of representation is not necessarily in bringing material benefits, but in altering stereotypes about who can be a political leader and in making it less socially acceptable to discriminate against lower castes. Amy Alexander (2012) finds that increase in the representation of women in parliament is associated with women's beliefs in women's ability to govern. Leadership by women has further been shown to influence adolescent girls' career aspirations and educational attainment (Beaman et al. 2012). A photograph of a two-year-old black girl mesmerized by a painting of Michelle Obama at the National Portrait Gallery that went viral in 2018 illustrates the significance of representation (figure 2c). Reflecting on the reaction to the image, the girl's mother noted that her parents, who grew up in segregated America, could not have imagined a black president and first lady. She wrote, "Only by being exposed to brilliant, intelligent, kind black women can my girls and other girls of color really understand that their goals and dreams are within reach" (Curry 2018). Michelle Obama was aware of the effect that the portrait could have when she spoke at its unveiling: "They [Girls and girls of color] will see an image of someone who looks like them hanging on the walls of this great American institution . . . *And I know the kind of impact that will have on their lives because I was one of those girls*" (Curry 2018, emphasis added).

CONCLUSIONS

Theories of development are premised on the idea of equality of opportunity regardless of an individual's material endowment (Roemer 2009). Scholars and policymakers have hence focused on ensuring fuller access to public goods, especially education and health care (Sen 1999). This is reflected in the centrality of the Human Development Index in measuring well-being. But aggregate measures of development cannot tell us how social opportunity is distributed across ascriptive identities. States with well-functioning social services may still exclude certain groups from its public institu-

tions. Status inequality presents a unique set of challenges to equalization of social opportunity that mere investment in public goods cannot capture. An identity-based idea of justice faces the additional burden of dismantling status beliefs and biases, both institutional and psychological.

Although most identity-based movements grapple with questions of recognition and stigmatization, this article shows that status is fundamentally tied to the economic structure of the society. In the case of status groups, misrecognition and misrepresentation are not just the mechanism for social exclusion, but social hierarchy generates economic inequality between groups. Further, the social and economic distance between groups generated because of segregationist practices and historical discrimination presents unique structural challenges for political mobilization. The comparison of different types of identity-based movements is instructive to understand the role of structural inequality in social change. In the United States, for example, no measured public opinion attitude has changed more dramatically than same-sex marriage. Racial attitudes, in contrast, continue to remain sticky (Rosenfeld 2017). Meta-studies on contact theory also shows that contact with sexual minorities is more effective in reducing prejudice than racial minorities (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Although homosexual people also face discrimination in employment, unlike racial minorities, they are geographically and socioeconomically integrated. Michael Rosenfeld (2017) attributes the shift in public attitudes to interaction with gay or lesbian friends or family members.

From a policy perspective, identity-based concerns have been addressed through policies supporting cultural diversity. The scholarship of multiculturalism, motivated by the politics of Anglophone and Francophone Canada (Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1995), conceptualizes ethnic groups as culturally distinct, but hierarchically equal. The focus is hence on the politics of difference. Tracing the Canadian state's genocidal policies toward indigenous groups, Glen Coulthard (2014) argues that multicultural policies cannot address the structural inequality between the indigenous population, and An-

glophone and Francophone settlers at its generative roots. Similarly, in the case of racial inequality, Frantz Fanon (2008, 178) notes that "the black problem is not just about blacks living among whites, but about the black man exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonialist, capitalist society that happens to be white."

Racial capitalism in the Americas has received mainstream attention in recent years (Robinson 1983), but the distinction between symbolic and material politics continues to dominate the scholarship on ethnic inequality. Emphasizing the cultural turn in the scholarship on colonialism, political theorists on the empire argue that "bypassing the political economy of empire, and thus viewing indigenous dispossession, slavery, and imperial despotism primarily through the prism of racism, white supremacy, and cultural arrogance, risks falling into a sort of idealism or inverted reductionism. The lexical priority accorded to these ideological formations downplays the fact that slavery, settlerism, and despotism were above all modalities of expropriating land, labor, and social knowledge, and reorganizing them in the pursuit of wealth, profit and revenue." (Marwah et al. 2020, 291). It should therefore not be surprising that 43 percent of respondents in a recent survey in Britain believed that the empire was beneficial for the colonies (Satia 2020). Claims about the "benefits" of colonialism—transfer of modern institutions, investment in infrastructure, political stability—have little empirical basis (Satia 2021). The revenue records of the East India Company, for example, show that public works made up less than 2 percent of its expenditure. A substantial portion of the resources went into law enforcement to maintain the imperial state; the rest was remitted to Britain (Kohli 2020).

Cultural policies such as recognition of language rights or same-sex marriage can indeed lead to greater inclusion. But such measures do not carry a significant material cost for the dominant group. Redistribution or the recruitment of members of marginal groups, in contrast, is first and foremost economic. Elite resistance to affirmative action is generally based on questions of meritocracy and efficiency, despite evidence to the contrary (Bhavnani and Lee 2019; Deshpande and Weisskopf 2014).

Symbolic politics is not just inadequate to address status inequality, but can even be misleading. Reflecting on the disappointing policy response to the BLM movement, for example, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2022, 5) uncovers two trends, "the elite's tactic of performing symbolic identity politics to pacify protestors without enacting material reforms; and their efforts to rebrand (not replace) existing institutions; also using elements of identity politics." Theories of multiculturalism are better equipped to address recognition gaps in unranked societies. Ethnic inequality has been found to be a stronger predictor of redistribution than cultural difference (Baldwin and Huber 2010), ethnic diversity (Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou 2016), and income inequality (Chakrabarti 2021). The politics of status is hence distinct from the politics of difference.

Although legacies of slavery, colonialism, and the caste system present distinct challenges for redistribution, social hierarchies have been reduced in many contexts. New immigrant groups in the United States such as the Irish, Italians, Polish, and Jewish people faced blatant discrimination well into the twentieth century but gradually came to be seen as "white" (Roediger 2005; Brodkin 1998). Caste-based inequality in some parts of India has dramatically reduced over the last century. Across these contexts, political mobilization has been central in the destigmatization of these groups. The recruitment of immigrants in the party system in American cities contributed to their political and social inclusion and paved the way for progressive reforms before the New Deal (Golway 2014). Caste-based political mobilization in southern India were instrumental in reducing social hierarchy and making public policies more responsive to the masses (Ahuja 2019).

To conclude, Max Weber (1978) had conceptualized three types of inequality in industrial societies—status, power, and resources. The three sources are distinct, but status, power, and resources are mutually reinforcing (figure 3). Political representation or power has implications for status politics. Tali Mendelberg (2022, this issue) argues that political mobilization is not just an attempt to gain resources and power, but often a way to obtain status. Because official laws reflect the norms of the

Figure 3. Status, Resources, and Power
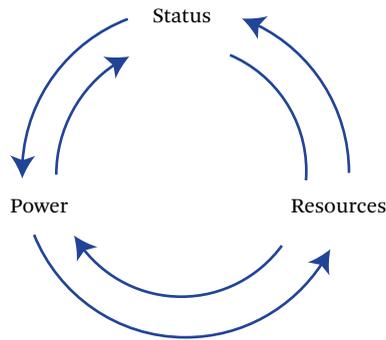
Source: Author's tabulation.

group that control the state, people infer status from public displays of authority and group representation. Further, the state is in a unique position to declare and enforce norms for the entire community (Gusfield 1986). Access to the state determines access to public services and security, including freedom from harassment by state officials, and access to jobs and markets (Chandra and García-Ponce 2019). This is especially relevant in societies where state institutions have historically represented the interests of dominant groups (Mansbridge 1999).

The representation of low-status groups in state institutions and public spaces can potentially reduce the real and imagined social distance between groups by destigmatizing status beliefs, which can in turn support redistributive politics by allowing cross-class alliances to emerge. The research agenda on status in the future should be cognizant of the pitfalls of previous generations of scholarship and needs to find creative ways of combining insights from social psychology into research on group-based political mobilization and redistributive politics.

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Status, Symbols, and Politics: A Theory of Symbolic Status Politics

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Studies of politics are increasingly attempting to account for status. However, status remains undertheorized in much of that research. This article sketches a theory of status in politics, distinguishing status from prejudice, identity, cultural difference, and concrete threats to interests. It shows how status accounts for some of the apparent effects of these variables or for patterns they cannot explain. I focus on the symbolic facets of status, connecting theories of symbolic politics with theories of status.

Keywords: status, symbols, politics, identity, cultural difference

What is status, and how does it function in politics? These questions have gained urgency with the rise of populism, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarianism across the globe. Increasingly, political scientists are attempting to explore the role of status in the challenges facing democracies.[1] Recognition that economic explanations do not suffice is beginning to take hold (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018).

Further, the rise of ethno-nationalism is only one of many examples where economic models fall short. People who experience disadvantage do not always or often perceive the disadvantage and take instrumental steps to address it (Fiske 2011). Additionally, advantaged as well as disadvantaged groups are often willing to give up material resources in favor of status. Concrete self-interest—income, jobs, assets, property—rarely explains political attitudes (Sears and Funk 1991). Because standard theories in politics tend to be materialist and utilitarian, they expect social inequality to prompt revolt. However, the field is littered with disconfirmations of this prediction (McClendon 2018). For example, even as income inequality has risen, low-income citizens have not demanded more redistribution from the government (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Kelly and Enns 2010; McCall 2013; Franko, Tolbert, and Witko 2013; Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015). Class inequality is only one of many dimensions of inequality for which materialist theories offer incomplete explanations.

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1. The neglect of status has not figured prominently in critiques of the self-interest model.

Contrary to materialist theories, resources are not always a goal; sometimes they are a way to achieve status (Ridgeway 2013). In many cases of deep political conflict, people want the authoritative recognition of higher status. Important political events, issues, movements, and laws often arise because groups seek to change or maintain their status relative to others. Political systems allocate not only valued material resources but also collective social value.

The main alternative to materialist theories of politics are theories of culture and identity. These explanations, however, also do not suffice (Gidron and Hall 2017). A central idea of research on cultural and identity conflict in politics is *difference*. This focus on difference per se obscures the role of status, however. Difference is a necessary but not sufficient condition for identity politics. It is when difference becomes inferiority—when identities are assigned a rank—that identity and culture become politically potent.

To understand many of the central puzzles in the politics of inequality, it is necessary to understand what status is. Although the concept is well established outside political science, it has received only spotty attention in studies of politics. Instead, political scientists tend to focus on power, resources, class, culture, moral values, identity, prejudice, and norms. Status is often assumed to be indistinguishable from these or to have the same effect. That assumption is a misconception.

Status politics rests on symbolic meaning (Edelman 1985; Gusfield 1986). Politics confers social rank through symbolic signals of norms of social value. Symbols are the currency of status, much as material resources are the currency of power and of class. Laws, official rules, and the exercise of political office do not only confer power; they can also symbolize status. Governmental actions can implicitly allocate "badges of ranked order" (Petersen 2002, 262). The law, the ceremonial exercise of political office, and other distinctive features of government put the full authority of the most coercive institution in society behind the allocation of collective social value to a group. Government can signal whose traditions, moral standards, and language are worthy of wide esteem and

whom society should cast out. It designates which groups deserve access to resources and privileged practices and which groups may be neglected, exploited, and stigmatized. Government also symbolizes status in its very composition (Chandra 2004; Chauchard 2014). When members of a social group hold political power, the trappings of political office signal that it merits authority (Mansbridge 1999). Efforts to change the status hierarchy often aspire to change the symbolic signals of government. They leverage politics to change the allocation of status and not only the distribution of economic resources and power. Moreover, they often do so with symbols that communicate their status injury. In addition, some ostensibly apolitical features of society, including the visibility of a language, or discourse about demographic change, can become politically potent symbols.

The concept of status provides not only an alternative to materialist concepts but also a particular way to interpret variables central in the study of political psychology and political behavior: stereotypes, prejudice, identity, and the effects of the balance of in-group and out-group numbers. These are often assumed to originate from one of three fundamental causes: a deep suspicion of the stranger, hard-wired mental biases and heuristics, or competition over concrete resources. However, conflicts between social identities are not only rooted in an aversion to difference, cognitive limitations, or conflict over interests. They are also responses to—and expressions of—status. Furthermore, they are not always causes of conflict. They are also causes of the absence of conflict. They may eliminate conflict when they are written into durable hierarchies of collective social value.

How does political authority affect social status? What are the links between social status, politics, and social inequality? Why and how do people contest status in the political system, and how does political mobilization change the political allocation of status? How does social status affect politics? How is status distinct from prejudice, identity, social norms, culture, economic class, and resources such as money, land, and numerical strength? These are unwieldy questions. They cannot be an-

swered here. I take only a partial step, aiming toward a theory of status in politics, with attention to social inequalities.[2] These literatures suggest that status is important and distinct from other core concepts.

A THEORY OF SYMBOLIC STATUS POLITICS

My point of departure is the concept of *symbolic politics* (Edelman 1985; Sears 1993). Political "condensation" symbols are signals of a distant, complex referent that evoke "pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, [or] promises of future greatness" (Edelman 1985, 5). Theories of symbolic politics are supported by decades of behavioral and cognitive psychology research on System 1 processes (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Strack and Deutsch 2004; Sears 2001).

This framework offers a sharp contrast between symbolic and concrete (Citrin and Green 1990; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears and Funk 1991; Sears et al. 1980). In political science, influential theories often assume that people take political action to seek resources (jobs, income, economic opportunity). By contrast, symbolic politics theory argues that people are more often concerned with implementing their in-group's values. By the same token, elites do not use communication merely to signal policy positions or to claim credit and deflect blame for the conditions that voters live in, as standard theories of politics posit. They also use messages to evoke anger, disgust, and fear, or enthusiasm and hope in response to long-held associations.

Symbols

Symbolic politics theory has developed a coherent alternative to materialist theories, but it has not focused on status. I use it as a building block for a theory of *symbolic status politics*. Symbols implicate social status in evoking status-based emotions (such as "glories and humiliations"). Symbols connect status, emotions, and objects or acts that represent social value. Political symbols signal what kinds of people and whose codes of behavior are worthy in the eyes of society as a whole. They reflect and maintain notions of who is esteemed and who is stigmatized by the political community, often, the nation. They represent the official, authoritative expectation about the appropriate status of in-groups and out-groups. Using the implied force of ultimate coercive authority, they powerfully communicate and reinforce status beliefs, such as who is competent, prosocial, or otherwise valued, and who deserves privilege.

Contests over laws, or the official actions of government-run institutions such as schools or police departments, are not only conflicts over material costs and benefits, whether money, assets, security, freedom, or personal safety. They are also struggles over the social rank that these institutions confer. If these institutions designate a group's norm as the societal norm, teaching its traditions as representative of society's traditions, they signal a high status for the group. If these institutions punish, surveil, and control a group, or shame the group for its social position, they attach stigma that lowers the group's status in society. A conflict over what government does may be more about status than about power, resources, or actually regulating behavior—when it signals the social standing of a group or its ways of life.

Government actions matter partly because they create widespread knowledge of what others know (Chwe 2013). People correctly infer from these official signals what society views as the relative group position. These symbols or experiences let "everyone know which group is 'on top'," who is moving up and who is moving down (Petersen 2002, 43).

It is well known that governmental symbols create national unity or enhance the authority of a government, but little is known about the use of political symbols to confer status. Joseph Gusfield (1986, 170–71) labels the former "gestures of cohesion" and the latter "gestures of differentiation." Symbols of the former convey consensual affirmation of unity. For example, when an American president dies, all the living past presidents attend the funeral, signaling a consensus of respect for the presidency. By contrast, symbols of differentiation use the author-

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2. I synthesize studies in political science and related fields, primarily on the United States, my area of expertise.

ity of government to signal esteem or stigma for a particular group. As Gusfield (1986, 172) notes, using symbolic signals, "governments take sides in social conflicts and place the power and prestige of the public, operating through the political institution, on one side or the other. . . . they indicate the kinds of persons, the tastes, the moralities, and the general lifestyles toward which government is sympathetic or censorious. . . . it is through this mechanism of symbolic character that a government affects the status order."

Social movements and interest groups often aim to elicit these symbolic signals as a means of creating norms that affect the group's status. The more authoritative the entity, the more effective its normative signal may be. The same logic applies to left-wing movements, which seek to flatten the hierarchy, and to right-wing movements, which seek to preserve or enhance it.

Defining Status

Status is a collectively defined rank of social value (for similar definitions, see Goffman 1951, 294; Gusfield 1986, 14; Ridgeway 2013). Status can be personal; it can accrue to an individual independent of their social identity. Status can also be social, a collectively defined rank of social value based on social identity. As Cecilia Ridgeway (2013) notes, social status draws on cultural "beliefs about group differences regarding who is 'better' (esteemed and competent)." Status beliefs act "through micro-level social relations," cumulatively channeling "higher status groups toward positions of resources and power . . . through these processes, status writes group differences such as gender, race, and class-based lifestyle into organizational structures of resources and power, creat-

ing durable inequality" (Ridgeway 2013; on status as a cultural scheme, see also Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue).[3]

This definition has three elements. When it comes to social status, membership is the first element. Status accrues to a social identity through traits, behaviors, or objects deemed particular to it. Identity can be more or less porous or hard and more or less salient. Rank distinctions may become more pronounced with hard group boundaries. In turn, if rank is extreme and entrenched, it may reify the social boundary (Lamont 1992). In other words, rank and prejudice can be mutually reinforcing.

The second element is social value. Status rests on collectively defined social value, that is, widely shared ideas about which people deserve more respect, esteem, prestige, honor, admiration, dignity, and worth (Gusfield 1986, 15; Ridgeway 2013).[4] These terms are not interchangeable, but they all provide some form of social value, a concept distinct from identity and cultural difference. Note that social value is collectively defined, derived from widely shared beliefs and moral sentiments. Status is not derived from the opinion of one or of a few. It depends on norms. Status is allocated based on widespread conventions that socially construct a group's traits, practices, or ways of life, and assign them overall social worth. This means that status is not absolute nor objective. It depends on intersubjective ideas about which social identity is more esteemed than others. That is why even low-status groups may internalize their status (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Status rests on the social value assigned by a collective. This is a key distinguishing element of status.

The final component is rank. Status is a hierarchy of esteem. Some people are ranked

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3. This definition also draws on sociological literature on a "sense of group position" (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Masuoka and Junn 2013). The sense of group position begins with bounded identities separated by psychological and social distance. Second, it consists of beliefs in out-group inferiority and in-group superiority on dimensions valued by the higher ranked group. These beliefs result in a rank of esteem. The third element is the belief that the higher ranked group deserves exclusive or advantageous privileges and goods. This belief directly links prejudice to inequalities in resources. Consequently, attempts to flatten the status hierarchy elicit resentment. Put differently, the sense of group position is a form of group consciousness for higher-ranked groups, and a "legitimating ideology" (Miller et al. 1981; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). The theory I develop draws on these elements but does not bundle them into an ideology.

4. Dignity belongs within the concept of status and outside the concept of identity.

above and others below. To be sure, esteem in itself does not require rank. It does not exist only in a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Just because a person or a group has more esteem does not mean others must have less. However, status ranks esteem and allocates more of it to some than to others.

Rank Relative to Whom?

Esteem serves as a powerful individual motive, and individuals engage in social comparison with others in an automatic way, without necessarily being aware of it (Fiske 2011, 84–86).[5] However, spontaneous comparisons of rank occur primarily with in-group peers and not so readily with outgroups (Fiske 2011, 90; McClendon 2018). Upward comparisons to those just above ourselves and within reach are motivated by the aspiration to increase one's esteem (Fiske 2011, chapter 5). As individuals compare themselves with in-group members who have higher status than themselves, they may strive to conform to in-group norms (McClendon 2014). The group then becomes more uniform internally and better able to act collectively (Fiske 2011, 119, 121). Downward comparisons mitigate demands for status change: people whose incomes exceed that of coethnic urban residents are less supportive of economic redistribution even though their ethnic group would benefit from it (McClendon 2018). Maintaining high status within the in-group weighs more than absolute economic interests (McClendon 2018).

When people do compare themselves with an out-group, they develop more stereotyped judgments and psychological distance from it (Fiske 2011, 121). When high-status members of a low-ranked group compare themselves with a high rank out-group rather than down within rank, they express more political discontent. For example, middle-class Blacks were at the forefront of the urban rebellions of the mid-

1960s (Kerner Commission 1968). Contrary to resource explanations or theories of anomie, and consistent with a status explanation, many Blacks in the rebellions had relatively high education and a history of employment. They were relatively high status within their racial group. Resources are not an adequate explanation for this pattern. Resources would not facilitate rebellion, nor accrue to those who rebel. Instead, Blacks with relatively more resources rebelled because their higher status within their racial group could not translate into commensurate status outside the group in a White-dominated society. This pattern generalizes beyond the 1960s. Across time, more-educated Blacks express more status discontent than less-educated Blacks (Hochschild 1995).[6]

Self-Esteem

Esteem is a central element of status. However, the link between status and self-esteem is far from direct (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003). One type of esteem rests on the approval of the individual as an individual; another type rests on the approval of one's in-group and thus of the person as a group member; and a third type is unresponsive to social evaluations (Fiske 2011, 120). Groups evaluated as incompetent and weak but friendly and supportive draw low respect as a social category but high personal esteem (Fiske 2011).[7]

The distinction can help explain how low status is perpetuated. If society assigns a social group to obedience, service, and sacrifice, then meeting those expectations can be a form of personal achievement and competence. This personal esteem does not elevate the social rank of that category. However, interpersonal interaction that signals high esteem for low-status people as individuals can alleviate the low value of their category. This inequality-enhancing result is an underappreciated function of politeness, kindness, and social warmth.

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5. Many social contexts heighten mental attention to status, and set in motion an entire psychological system of emotional expression, behavioral scripts, and conceptions of the self (Fiske 2011; Markus and Stephens 2017).

6. Similarly, in Katherine Cramer's interviews of rural Wisconsin residents, many of those expressing rural political consciousness were local civic and business elites (Cramer 2016).

7. This finding forms an important element of the stereotype content model. Erving Goffman (1951) similarly offered a distinction between personal "esteem" and status "prestige."

Moreover, status discontent may follow when social interactions systematically fail to convey personal approval. For example, in Susan Pharr's study of a civil service agency in Kyoto, women collectively coordinated to stop serving tea to male colleagues when the personal regard they received from the men plummeted (Pharr 1990). These "tea rebellion" participants expressed a willingness to serve tea to men who acknowledged their act with "warmth and appreciation" (176). What they would not countenance was the incivility they received while performing an act emblematic of a low-status identity. Similarly, Japanese low-caste students protested against their teachers when teachers regularly engaged in "deliberately condescending" behavior toward individual students (177). Status groups may mobilize when their members experience a drop in personal esteem despite their performance of status-role expectations. Finding itself bereft of personal respect, the group may come to see the status hierarchy as injurious and unjust.

Protest that dramatizes the effect of low group status on low personal esteem may be especially effective in challenging the legitimacy of a low status. Some of the most salient events of the American civil rights movement did so. Movement actors showcased the status injury to Black Americans by highlighting its personal indignity. The searing images of the movement include crowds insulting people engaged in common everyday behaviors such as eating lunch or going to school while segregationist crowds poured ketchup and mustard over their heads (in the Woolworth sit-ins) or pelted them with tomatoes (in the iconic Norman Rockwell painting of Ruby Bridges). These were vivid symbols of segregation's affront to individuals.

Social movement organizations often strive to communicate the personal indignity of their low status, and they use vivid images, slogans, dramatic incidents, and other symbols to do so. The symbols allow movements to link the personal injury to the status harm their group suffers at the hands of an unjust system. Political movements use symbols of personal injury because doing so allows them to implicate their group status as a cause of unjustified denial of personal esteem. From there, they can show that group status is systemic, and point to the need for political change.

Dignity versus Prestige

An asymmetry in the effect of status is common. For example, in studies of relative income, people are more motivated to avoid being lower than average than they are to be higher than average (Card et al. 2012). Some aspects of status may be more motivating because they implicate low status: disrespect, dishonor, and worthlessness. Because those are attached to shame and disgust, they may have more potent psychological power (Fiske 2011). When status becomes low enough, it implicates the fear of being cast out from the community. Avoiding low status means avoiding stigma and maintaining belonging, a basic need (Fiske 2011, 116). Thus, dignity and worth are central concepts in normative critiques of inequality (Fraser, Honneth, and Golb 2003). They are also central in philosophical defenses of universal rights and liberties, including the right to self-govern (Waldron 2012). Nancy Fraser specifically argues that basic respect is universally deserved, even as prestige can be unequal without being unjust as long as the opportunity for prestige is equal (Fraser, Honneth, and Golb 2003). Government must communicate symbolic recognition to groups denied dignity, because that is how society can most authoritatively signal the end of a norm of shame and disgust directed at the group.

WHAT STATUS IS NOT

It is important to distinguish status from competing constructs including class, identity, culture, moral values, and threat. I elaborate on these below.

Status Differs from Class

Status is perhaps most often confounded with class. It is thus important at the outset to distinguish between them. Class refers to a group's objective location in relation to a market. It is a set of people defined by control over concrete resources, including goods and services. In Max Weber's theory, a number of different markets constitute class (Weber 1978). In Marx's theory, a class is defined by its relation to the means of production (owners versus workers),

and there are two major classes, the capitalist class and the working class (DiMaggio 2012). In either framework, class is objective, not subjective. It does not depend on identity and sense of belonging to a common group. Nor does it depend on perceptions of a group's value, beliefs about the characteristics of a group, or cultural traditions and lifestyle norms. In addition, class is not inherently relative; a worker is a worker because they do not own capital, not because they have less capital. Thus status differs from class in two ways. First, it is defined subjectively, by perception of social value. Second, it is defined as a rank.[8]

Relative—Versus Absolute—Economic Resources as a Form of Status

An unequal allocation of concrete resources can represent status in and of itself. As minimal group experiments have shown in settings around the world, group conflict is often the product of relative comparisons more than absolute deprivation (Fiske 2011; Huddy 2003; Tajfel 1981). In fact, people are willing to pay to ensure that their social category has more than its competitor (Brewer 1979; Messick and Mackie 1989; Tajfel 1981). As Michael Hout (2016, 219) puts it, "people respond to their relative position in society rather than their absolute level of living." Relative income matters for job satisfaction, happiness, health, longevity, and reward-area activation in the brain, even accounting for absolute income (Brown et al. 2008; Card et al. 2012; Veblen 1899).

Moreover, relative income may matter most when it denotes rank (Frank 1985). Individuals are specifically sensitive to their position in an ordinal hierarchy (Brown et al. 2008). People tend to heuristically attend to how many have lower and how many higher incomes than oneself. Ordinal rank affects pay and job satisfaction independently of cardinal metrics such as distance from the mean, how far away the top and bottom are, or the weight of income above or below one's own (Brown et al. 2008; Kuziemko et al. 2014). Being the second-lowest ver-

sus fifth-lowest in an income distribution matters even when the money is the same (Brown et al. 2008).

Relative economic rank in turn affects political attitudes. Ilyana Kuziemko and her colleagues (2014) convincingly demonstrate that occupying the second-lowest income rank independently reduces support for redistribution both in dyadic games and regarding government redistribution. People are particularly averse to falling from a low to a lower place. This tendency goes a long way to explaining resistance to redistribution by those who would benefit in absolute terms but lose their relative rank above the bottom.

Relative income is not the only source of status; relative spending is as well, and its symbolic meaning gives it a particular potency (Kraus, Rheinschmidt, and Piff 2012, 154). Consumption symbolizes rank in a clearer way than relative income, because it is much more visible to others. *Conspicuous consumption* is a familiar term: people convert money to objects whose major purpose is to signal status (Veblen 1899, 75). This includes major financial purchases—and clothes, accessories, leisure activities, and personal appearance (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Social media signals these status symbols, and these signals motivate people to maintain a high status by keeping up with their social media friends (Thal 2020). Similarly, social milieus populated by many affluent people foster resistance to increasing taxes on the wealthy (Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal 2017). Status signals nudge individuals to adopt more meritocratic explanations of success—and more economically conservative political views (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Thal 2020).

The Culture Explanation

How does status differ from culture and identity? Theories of politics often explain political phenomena as the product of ethnic, religious, or linguistic difference. The difference may be objective, rooted in actual traditions and practices, or perceived, rooted in stereotypes and

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8. Of course, class also involves ideas and cultural processes. Objective class may or not be subjectively recognized, and views of class matter in and of themselves. Class perceptions, beliefs, and reasoning are heavily shaped by systems of knowledge, and cultural schema are themselves ideological products of economic structures that produce them. The literature on these ideas is extensive (see, for example, Gramsci 1971).

prejudice. In some studies, the authors argue that difference matters in itself, whether it is linguistic, religious, or ethnic. As Paul Sniderman and his colleagues put it (2000, 128), "it is the attribution of difference, and not the form of it, that principally sets immigrants apart." The more noticeable the difference, the more likely the conflict (Sniderman et al. 2000). Similarly, Donghyun Choi, Mathias Poertner, and Nicholas Sambanis (2019) attribute anti-Muslim discrimination in Europe to the perception of difference, and hypothesize that when Muslims exhibit behavioral commitment to shared civic norms (by picking up litter), this common identity will overcome discrimination. This focus on difference and the lack of shared identity is common in social psychology and political psychology.

However, I argue that it is not the perception of difference that creates conflict. Instead, the perception of ranked difference politicizes identity. Research that focuses on difference per se obscures what may be the most potent aspect of culture and identity. To clarify, I do not argue that status can be entirely separated from culture but instead that many studies in political science treat status and culture as two unrelated concepts. Instead, it is more useful to analyze cultural or identity conflict through the lens of status.

For example, consider Choi and colleagues' excellent study of European discrimination against Muslims (2019). The study tests the impact of immigrants' Muslim identity and their compliance with a local norm against littering on the level of social exclusion they experience. In one field experiment, a confederate in distress wears either a cross or a hijab. The investigators then assess how often they receive help from passersby. The investigators find that the hijab-wearer gets less help than the (identical) cross-wearer. In a second field experiment, a distressed confederate either wears or does not wear a hijab and either complies with a local antilittering norm or does not. The authors find that the hijab-wearer receives more help when complying, though compliers receive still more help absent the hijab. The conclusion is that shared identity, signaled through common civic norms, alleviates exclusion, though anti-Muslim discrimination is difficult to overcome

even then. Thus the study's main concept is identity as difference: immigrants face exclusion when they are perceived as different. However, according to a theory of status, identity as difference does not suffice to explain the findings. Native-born non-Muslim Europeans find the hijab threatening not because it is different but because it represents a set of cultural practices that appear to them both alien and inferior to their own. Muslim identity and practice are regarded as having low esteem, and their presence as degrading the esteem of their own identity and practice. Further, the response behavior—social exclusion—is a form of status. The exclusion positions the excluded at a rank below those doing the excluding. The behaviors that symbolically signal disrespect help native Europeans reconstruct a hierarchy of dignity. Failing to offer help functions as a way to reduce the other's social value. It takes away their dignity and thereby reinforces one's own superior position.

As another example, consider the literature on ethnic fractionalization. The centerpiece of this literature is the robust finding that the more ethnically fractured the population, the less likely is the country to provide public goods that serve the needs of the country's population. Demographic diversity correlates with inefficient or suboptimal governance, social capital, and violence (Easterly and Levine 1997; Habyarimana et al. 2009). A number of explanations have been offered for this finding. First, diverging economic interests may prevent agreement on what government should provide and to whom it should provide it. Majority ethnic groups may not want to share resources with minorities (Abrajano and Hajnal 2017). Alternatively, when group boundaries are hard and come with different traditions, groups may have difficulty cooperating and pooling their resources for the common good.

However, the underprovision of social welfare benefits may not be directly caused by cultural differences. In fact, measures of cultural difference between these groups do not predict it once other factors are accounted for (Baldwin and Huber 2010). What does predict it? Unequally distributed economic resources among ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups (Baldwin and Huber 2010). Such findings open the pos-

sibility that status may explain what is commonly attributed to culture and identity.

An example of how status explains what appears to be the work of difference comes from research on AIDS (Cohen 1999; Lieberman 2009). In Cathy Cohen's (1999) study, many Black communities did not rally racial solidarity to combat AIDS, which they disproportionately suffered, because they wished to avoid being further stigmatized by association with gay people and heroin users. Evan Lieberman (2009) offers a similar theory to explain why countries suffering substantial illness and death from AIDS nevertheless failed to prevent and treat AIDS. Ethnic fractionalization predicts the underprovision of government resources to fight HIV, not because it indexes cultural or ethnic conflict, but because in ethnically divided societies, ethnic groups seek to avoid being associated with a stigmatized illness. In sum, then, the motivation to distance from the stigma of gay identity overrides racial or national solidarity as well as concrete interests in health and survival. The explanation for scarce public goods, weak public health, and cultural exclusion does not lie in the absence of common cultural ground or even in ethnic conflict. The concepts of culture and identity are often used in ways that set status aside. The result is an incomplete understanding of the nature and causes of inequality, conflict, and discrimination. From a status perspective, what matters about culture is how it ranks people (Duckitt 2006; Masuoka and Junn 2013).

Status Versus Moral Issues

The AIDS case also demonstrates why status is necessary to understand the impact of moral issues in politics. Consider the movement to prevent legalized gay marriage. A prominent reason given was to preserve the practice of marriage. However, as a right-wing social movement, it may also have sought to maintain the higher status of heterosexuals. Marriage is a socially valued institution. If stigmatized groups are allowed to practice it, it will erode their stigma and flatten the esteem hierarchy of sex-ual orientation. Restricting marriage to heterosexuals ensures that heterosexuals retain exclusive access to an esteemed practice. The Defense of Marriage Act House committee report on H.R. 3396 put it this way: "Civil laws that permit only heterosexual marriage reflect and *honor* a collective moral judgment about human sexuality. This judgment entails both moral disapproval of non-normative sexuality, and a moral conviction that heterosexuality better comports with traditional (especially Judeo-Christian) morality."[9] Similarly, in the landmark *Obergefell* case, the amicus curiae brief of the Family Resource Council stated, "[marriage] is a privileged legal and social institution."[10] In other words, marriage confers esteem. Restricting this esteemed activity to one's in-group preserves its prestige and continues to confer that prestige only to the in-group. If one has to share a prestigious practice with a stigmatized group, that group's esteem rises, and the hierarchy flattens.

Without this lens of status, claims that gay marriage harms heterosexual marriage are difficult to understand. In fact, these claims on their face would suggest that marriage be made available to as many people as possible and that those who are not married be "converted" to marriage as nonbelievers are encouraged (sometimes forced) to adopt a "true" religion. If society were to extend marriage widely, marriage would gain force as a descriptive and prescriptive norm: everyone should and does get married. Thus marriage as a societal norm—one followed by as many as possible—is in conflict with marriage as a status-delimited norm—that is, a norm followed only by a high-status group as a mark of its privilege.

Maintaining relative rank, and attaching stigma or prestige, are functional, as the case of marriage illustrates. They are not simply overbroad expressions of fear of the other, or inaccurate perceptions of a group. Symbols that address intergroup relations are not trivial simply because they are symbolic; they can affect group status. Fights over those symbols are not merely expressive; nor are they a distraction from real, serious interests. Xenophobia,

9. Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-199, struck down, *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. 744 (2013).

10. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

prejudice, and stereotypes are often viewed as illogical, biased, and expressive, lacking in instrumentality. Once linked to status, they take on a logic of their own.

Many issues that seem to be about moral conflict may have a status dimension. They include gambling, pornography, prostitution, and alcohol and drugs. The symbolic politics of status are clear in the "moral" issue of prohibition (Gusfield 1986). In the United States, this was among the hardest fought and most salient political conflicts in the first decades of the twentieth century. Prohibition represented an attempt by rural, native-born, Protestant, White Americans to validate their cultural dominance in the face of rising status threats from their opposite. Their livelihoods were not at risk, but their ability to be the arbiters of national norms was. They turned to symbolic validation by the state, in the form of laws prohibiting drinking. As Gusfield writes, "the public acceptance of a set of ideal norms confers prestige and respect on them. It stamps them as those which are set forth as most worthy of obedience in the society. Correspondingly, acceptance of such ideal norms confers respect and prestige on those groups whose behavior is closest to them. It stamps such groups as those most worthy of emulation" (1986, 66).

Repeal in turn symbolized a status reversal for these groups. As one temperance movement member said, "we were once an accepted group. The leading people would be members. . . . today they'd be ashamed to belong. . . . today it's kind of lower-bourgeois" (Gusfield 1986, 138). The political loss represented and reinforced the status loss of pro-abstinence social groups. Their way of life lost its hold on societal consensus and became stigmatized. As the group's distinctive behavior—abstinence—grew in stigma, the social group that still practiced it increasingly lost its status (Gusfield 1986, 129–34). A group can lose status when law demotes its norms from the national consensus. (I return to status reversal later.)

Abortion is another case in point. Interviews in one study revealed that homemakers opposed the legalization of abortion partly because it implicitly undermined the social esteem of their role (Luker 1984). With legal abortion, government signaled a higher value for women's autonomy than for their domestic roles. The legality of abortion symbolized a status drop for women with domestic roles. Moral outrage over abortion was genuine and grounded in religious precepts. It was also, however, a reaction to status reversal. Political conflict over laws that regulate behavior may be waged in the language of morality when the moral code attaches to social rank of economic as well as cultural groups. From the perspective of concrete resources and power, abortion would seem to serve the interests of women. It gives them autonomy and freedom they can translate into more education, better occupations, and higher earnings. It gives them market power. However, it lowers the status of groups for whom having children confers higher status.

When a group's moral sensibility and ways of life are symbolically recognized by government recognition, the group garners esteem. This holds even if its ways of life are not widely practiced. In the standard theory of value conflict, each side wishes to impose its values on the other and make them as widespread as possible. It is a missionary account of moral conflict. From a symbolic status perspective, however, the goal is not to spread a tradition but to gain official recognition for it. In fact, from a status perspective, the ideal may be to exclude the low-status outgroup from access to practices that confer prestige. That approach may be especially likely when the identity boundary is hard and the low-status group is defined as inherently stigmatized. This account better explains some seemingly puzzling examples, such as the fight over gay marriage.

To be sure, morality can serve as its own core motive apart from status. A group wants its norms to be society's norms because it believes they are good and right, not only because that is a way to get high status for the group. Still, a group's determination to see its morality enshrined in law may have much to do with its motivation to raise or defend its status.

Numbers as Symbols of Status: What Does "Threat" Threaten?

Numbers are an important variable in studies of politics. They are often assumed to matter because they are a source of power or an indi-

cator of concrete interests (Chandra 2004; Posner 2004). However, numbers can also represent status, and the effect of group numbers may be due to status. To be sure, groups with a large number of members can use their greater number to generate political power. However, the significance of numbers may lie as much in their symbolic signal about which group can shape the rank of social value as in their ability to directly deliver absolute levels of concrete power.

Consider the racial threat thesis. Research consistently finds that places with a higher percentage of Blacks are also the places where Whites perceive threat to White political power and access to jobs or resources and where they seek to prevent these losses (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018; Key 1949, 1; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995). The effect of numbers is typically interpreted as arising from threats to concrete resources. This is in line with realistic group conflict theory (Bobo 1988).

However, numbers could instead matter because of status (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). If numbers mattered because they supply power, their increase would matter linearly, or at a tipping point that triggers political power, such as the majority threshold. But in fact it is the sharp rise in outgroup numbers from a small baseline, and not absolute numbers or tipping points, that predicts perceptions of cultural threat, hate crimes toward various outgroups, and anti-immigration views (Newman 2013; Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). Hate crime patterns are a form of symbolic "neighborhood defense" (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). These acts do not directly protect economic resources—property values—but represent a hardened boundary against the inclusion of low-status groups (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). Once the neighborhood has diversified, the status loss has already occurred and rising numbers would not further threaten symbolic status. Similarly, if rising numbers threatened material resources or actual safety, or prompted generalized prejudice, then high percentages of immigrants would have similar effects regardless of baseline or trend. But the number of immigrants in itself does not strongly predict negative attitudes toward immigrants (Hopkins 2010; Citrin et al.

1997; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Kinder and Kam 2010, 147–49).

Furthermore, if numbers mattered only through threat to concrete resources, or even through generalized prejudice, they would affect perceptions of that specific threat. Yet rising numbers of immigrants in previously homogenous areas affect only perceptions of cultural threat, not of job competition or crime; cultural threat is in turn associated with restrictive immigration preferences (Newman 2013). Findings from Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson (2014b, 2014a) likewise support a status interpretation for numbers. When they showed White Americans information about rising numbers of non-Whites in the United States, they observed increased implicit and explicit racial bias, weaker support for overtly or indirectly racially egalitarian policies, more conservative political ideology and party choices, and perceived racial status threat—the belief that as racial minorities' status rises, White Americans' influence in society will decrease (Craig and Richeson 2014b, 2014a). When they reassured respondents that White Americans will continue to have higher incomes and wealth than other racial groups, the demographic change no longer mattered to their political preferences or perception of racial status threat.

The main cause of opposition to immigration is not competition over concrete resources. Immigrant exclusion is not a defense against actual threats to an individual's concrete quality of life—jobs, money, or physical safety from crime. Instead, these attitudes are grounded in symbolic threats to the superior status of native citizens—their relative resources and the esteem conferred on their in-group values, traits, and traditions (Citrin et al. 1997; Schildkraut 2007; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990).

Much of the research on numbers, threat, or immigration neglects the concept of status. In many studies, minoritized groups are perceived as a threat to the nation's way of life and identity because they are viewed as culturally alien. Yet the findings, on the whole, are consistent with the effects of status, as Natalie Masuoka and Jane Junn (2013) argue. Resistance to equal-

ity is rooted not only in concern about economic interests, cultural difference, or dislike and stereotypes of an outgroup but also in a desire to protect the in-group's status. A changing balance of numbers can directly or indirectly signal a change in norms of collective value, and imply eroding political power to prevent such change. Rising or declining numbers can come to represent the rise or decline of a group's status. As the in-group loses numerical advantage, it loses its ability to influence how society will allocate ranked esteem.

APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY
In the following sections, I elaborate on how the theory can be applied. I consider political office as a status signal and ethnic violence.

Political Office as a Status Signal
An important example of how government confers symbolic status comes from Simon Chauchard's (2014) study of caste and status change in India. This case illustrates the symbolic meaning of holding political office. It shows how officeholding can increase social status by signaling basic respect for the group.

Scheduled castes (SCs), also known as Dalits, are an identity group defined by ancestry. Although India banned anti-Dalit discrimination in its founding constitution, Dalits in the 1990s continued to experience significant segregation, stigma, and exclusion. To address this situation, in 1993, India implemented a constitutional amendment mandating SC quotas for elected offices in village councils, a powerful and prevalent unit of government in India.[11] Chauchard studied the most powerful of these positions: the head of the village council. The council head not only wields significant power. They also hold a symbolically important role in presiding over village assemblies, or *gram sabhas* (Chauchard 2014, 406). As Chauchard puts it, "villagers may observe a member of the SCs seating ceremoniously on a dais, providing his or her opinion or signing off on the council's decisions. As the sarpanch and their entourage walk through village streets to assess various public works, villagers see members of the SCs on streets on which

they otherwise dared not venture" (Chauchard 2014, 407).

The quotas did not redistribute resources to SC members (Dunning and Nilekani 2013). The "reserved" villages were no more likely to select SC individuals to receive government program benefits. They did not build more infrastructure or public services that especially serve SC members. Officials continued to depend on dominant caste members for election, because even though a SC is guaranteed to occupy the office by law, which individual SC will do so is decided by election, with non-SC voters playing a crucial role (Chauchard 2014; Dunning and Nilekani 2013). Moreover, SCs were still stereotyped as lacking in hard work and intelligence.

However, despite gaining little power or concrete resources, and winning few hearts and minds, SCs did benefit from a distinct change in status. The higher-caste members in reserved villages were more likely to believe that fellow caste members socially accept SC members and would socially punish hostile behaviors against them (Chauchard 2014, 405). They believed that others in their group would treat SCs with respect, and would socially include them. They expressed an intention to avoid enforcing "untouchability" sanctions, such as ejecting SCs from integrated seating or threatening violence toward SCs entering a temple. Thus seating stigmatized identity members in a high-status political office creates basic dignity. It does not do so by changing attitudes about the group's traits and behaviors, but instead by changing the perception of social norms that regulate social value. This change in norms of respect is an important form of politically driven status change. This case illustrates how political symbols can change status independently of negative stereotypes (which lingered) and resources (also largely unchanged).

Similar findings in other parts of the world reinforce the notion that collective signals can alter norms while leaving negative stereotypes unchanged, and it is the change in norms that alters behavior (Tankard and Paluck 2016). For example, the landmark American civil rights legislation of the mid-twentieth century sig-

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11. Chauchard (2014) compares villages with and without a quota but with very similar numbers of SC villagers.

naled a new "norm of equality" in public discourse (Mendelberg 2001). Although racial stereotypes and interest-based conflicts continued, political discourse changed dramatically to accommodate new norms of equal social status.

Ethnic Violence

Having considered the matter of status reversal tangentially, I now focus on it directly, because the effects of status reversal showcase some of the most powerful consequences of status. As mentioned, social movement successes, whether gay marriage or abortion, often trigger an intense backlash because they represent status reversal. This phenomenon is widespread. During Ukraine's democracy movement in 2013, the sudden dismantling of hundreds of Soviet monuments evoked an electoral backlash: "failure to protect the Soviet memorials . . . served as a public signal of the diminishing influence of the Soviet legacy parties, which motivated higher turnout among their sympathizers" (Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022, 2). As Arturas Rozenas and Anastasiia Vlasenko argue, status loss may be more motivating than status gain, at least when it happens to groups with relatively high status. And status reversal comes from many sources, not only social movements, and has far reaching, troubling consequences, including large-scale violence.

Mass violence has many explanations (Horowitz 2000; Staub 1989). Nevertheless, the concept of status can help explain some empirical puzzles about violence. Violence is actually rare, even during times and events we associate with prevalent violence. Violence fails to materialize for most potential places, perpetrators, and victims (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). For example, even in twentieth-century Eastern Europe, the site of repeated mass killings and genocides, ethnic majorities massacred only some hated minorities but not others, and only in specific places and times (Petersen 2002). They did not do so uniformly, even when and where they had the ability.

For example, in 1941, between the Soviet and Nazi occupation, during a wave of pogroms, Poles did not massacre Jews because of economic competition, or because Jews had allied with the hated Soviets, or simply from anti-Jewish hatred. As Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg show (2018), local anti-Jewish pogroms did not occur where economic inequality or competition with Jews was toughest, or where Jews had most cooperated with the Soviets, or where the anti-Semitic party vote was highest. Instead, pogroms were prevalent where Jews and their allies had successfully mobilized for political equality with non-Jews. Pogroms were backlash to political status reversal.

Put differently, status is an underestimated yet parsimonious explanation (Petersen 2002). Status often features in explanations for ethnic violence. However, it has been unclear whether low-, high-, or equal-status groups are more targeted; whether status predicts violence or is simply confounded with other factors; and why violence varies dramatically across time and place.

According to Roger Petersen (2002), a consistent and powerful predictor of ethnic violence in this time and region is status *reversal*. Specifically, an ethnic group aggressed against an ethnic outgroup where and when their rank was reversed (52). The most egregious violence was triggered by clear and dramatic status change. These reversals may come about through war, military occupation, and the build-up or disintegration of state institutions.[12] This process is mediated by what Petersen calls resentment and what Richard Smith and Charles Hoogland (2020) call envy: the belief that one's in-group is unjustly subordinated to an outgroup, occupying a lower position than it deserves in society—and in politics (Petersen 2002, 40; Smith and Hoogland 2020, 62). According to this theory, resentment occurs when groups are initially arrayed in a hierarchy with marked group boundaries. It becomes activated by status reversal.

Resentment is reinforced by symbolic representations of status change. These include visible roles for the elevated group in government bureaucracies frequently encountered in

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12. These conflicts may turn violent when the state is not strong enough to monopolize the use of force. Aggressive groups do not always have the capacity to execute the aggression effectively.

ordinary life, such as the police, army, or other administrative structures that exercise control over a population (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). As the historian Jan Gross puts it, Poles who massacred Jews described how "offensive it was to see a Jew in a position of authority" (quoted in Petersen 2002, 264). As one observer remarked, "Offices and institutions that never saw a Jew on their premises abound now with Jewish personnel of all kinds" (quoted in Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018, 4). Those encounters are not only indicators of concrete power and resources; they make salient the symbolic cues of group rank. Other symbols include ethnically marked street names, and the official language, a "daily marker of subordination and humiliation" (Petersen 2002, 258). People infer status from salient public displays of authority and group representation.

Resentment is tied to status, and this distinguishes it from competing explanations. Petersen distinguishes resentment from three alternatives: realistic fear, historical hatred, and irrational rage (Petersen 2002). Fear is an accurate perception of concrete threat from an outgroup. Fear is a realistic assessment that the outgroup poses an existential threat to the ingroup. Politically mobilized Jews posed an actual threat to Polish political power (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2018). Hatred, by contrast, is prejudice—a constant underlying hostility based on perceived negative traits. For example, explanations of anti-Jewish massacres often point to anti-Semitic attitudes originating in medieval Catholic teachings such as the blood libel, attitudes said to drive the marginalization and harassment of Jews over millennia. Finally, the concept of rage derives from a frustration-aggression model. Being maltreated creates emotional pressure that erupts at available scapegoats.

A clear example of status reversal, resentment, and its violent consequences comes from Lithuania. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, two hundred thousand of the 240,000 Jews of Lithuania were murdered, nearly 85 percent, with Lithuanian complicity. Yet earlier in the century, Lithuanians had not engaged in mass violence against Jews, even as they did so against other ethnic groups. When the Soviets invaded in 1940, they placed Jews in

visible positions in the bureaucracy charged with intrusively centralizing Lithuanian agriculture. Jews gained symbolic status in other ways as well, for example, with Hebrew street signs in Jewish areas. In a very short period, the occupied Lithuanians lost their dominant status in their society, becoming subordinated to both the occupying Russians and the formerly subordinated Jews. As one Lithuanian put it, "Lithuanians, who had lived peacefully for centuries together with the Jews, in the course of a single year literally came to hate them" (Petersen 2002, 109). When the Soviets left in 1941, removing constraints against Lithuanian violence, and before the Germans took control, Lithuanians brutally attacked Jews, and continued the assault after the Nazis took over.

Why were ethnic Russians not attacked after the Nazi occupation? An instrumental logic would predict that they would be the targets, given that they had staffed much of the occupying Soviet regime. However, a resentment explanation predicts otherwise. Because Russians had been at the top of the status hierarchy, being ruled by them was not considered a moral wrong to be righted (Petersen 2002, 111). Jews were targeted because they had been a stigmatized low-ranked group suddenly lifted above Lithuanians.

Further evidence for a status reversal explanation is the symbolic nature of outgroup aggression. Rather than targeting the secular Jews who had occupied the positions of control over Lithuanians, violence targeted the symbolic representation of Jews as a group: religious Jews dressed in orthodox garb (Petersen 2002, 111). In addition, many attacks entailed symbolic humiliation. As Kopstein and Wittenberg (2018) note, symbolic humiliations were rife in the 1941 Polish pogroms of Jews, where Jews were forced to both tear down Soviet statues and engage in mock Jewish rituals such as praying over these statues. Finally, some of the most notable massacres occurred in the same place where Jews had symbolically asserted their rising status, for example, in Kaunas, where street signs had appeared in Hebrew (Petersen 2002, 100, 103, 116).

Even in 1941, Jews were not attacked in all areas of Lithuania. In Vilnius, Jews were a large and visible group. However, they had not been

elevated to higher-status positions. Instead, when the opportunity for violence arose, in Vilnius Lithuanians attacked Poles. Poles had elevated their status over Lithuanians when they had taken over the area in the immediately preceding period. When Lithuanians had the opportunity for mass violence, they took it to correct the status reversal they had experienced in that region at the hands of Poles.

The pattern does not fit the fear explanation, which would have targeted secular Jews and, even more so, Russians, the group directly inflicting oppression during the Soviet regime. Nor does the pattern fit the rage or hatred explanation, which would predict that Jews would be targeted at every opportunity, not only in 1941, and in all areas of Lithuania, such as Vilnius. Status reversal and its symbolic processes play an important role in explaining the pattern. The few Jews who did hold power over Lithuanians symbolically represented a reversal of group status as a whole. When group boundaries are sharply delineated, salient instances of government recognition come to be viewed as symbolic of a group's positions in the status hierarchy. Violence can be an attempt to decisively undo a status reversal.

CONCLUSION

The potency of status in politics is becoming increasingly clear, but what it is and how it differs from other concepts has been opaque in many studies of politics. This article offers a step toward a theory of status in politics.

Groups mobilizing in politics are not simply attempting to obtain concrete resources, or even power. They are often attempting to obtain status. Government not only holds a monopoly on coercive force; it is also an official authority for the allocation of status. Government recognizes group status with powerful symbolic forms. Citizens respond to symbols of status and political movements and organizations use symbolic representations of status to pursue their goals.

Status differs from class, interests, and other concepts linked with materialist assumptions. Concepts anchored to materialist theories, such as the threat of numbers, or the significance of group representation in political offices, can instead be interpreted through the lens of status. Status also differs from cultural and identity difference. It is not well captured by measures of prejudice, xenophobia, or subjective identity. These are necessary for a politics of status, but not sufficient. Status becomes political when identity and culture are ranked, when difference becomes a source of indignity or prestige.

Politics is a stage for symbols of group status and an arena for fights to control those symbols. Groups may seek to remove positive symbols enjoyed by those above or below them. They may especially seek to avoid negative symbols, that is, symbols of low status. Groups struggle over official symbols of group status because, in a pluralistic society, government is uniquely positioned to declare and enforce the norms of the entire community. As Gusfield (1986, 168, 171) puts it, "government is the only agency which claims to act for the entire society . . . the political agent representative of the society symbolizes the societal attitude, the public norm, toward some person, object, or social group." Symbols of regard or disregard are among the most powerful ways to signal which groups society values and devalues.

Status has been undertheorized for any number of reasons, but two stand out. First, status is subjective. It is difficult to differentiate it from other related concepts. This article is an attempt to move toward this differentiation. Second, status is about inequality. Inequality is obvious in societies with hard group boundaries and ossified disadvantage. It is less obvious in other societies. There, it becomes easy to focus too much either on materialist concepts (economic resources) or subjective concepts that do not build in rank, such as identity, culture, norms, or values. Scholars often use these concepts without considering how they involve status. I argued here that these phenomena often become politically potent precisely when they do involve status.

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Politicizing Status Loss Among Trump Supporters in 2020

BIKO KOENIG

Status loss—real or perceived—is seen as a key characteristic of how Donald Trump supporters make sense of the world. Drawing on five months of ethnographic and interview-based research, I argue that the motivations of Trump supporters are not only about status loss and anxiety, but also about the perceived injustice of it relative to competing notions of status worthiness that political opponents offer. I explore the process by which status-based claims are developed, deployed, and interpreted by campaign actors, volunteers, and voters. The political action of Trump supporters was spurred by emotionally laden rejections of status beliefs that did not center working-class values of hard work, manual occupations, and small-town family-centric culture. I show how the politicization of collective identities among the Trump supporters interviewed was enabled through a multilevel process that included the work of "identity entrepreneurs" in shaping the form and direction of the politicization process.

Keywords: Trump, collective identity, status, anxiety, populism

Something seemed to be troubling Mike.[1]

We had spent four hours on a hot August day knocking on doors in an older working-class neighborhood, keeping up a steady banter about the election as we went from door to door. Today we were canvassing the mostly white residents about their political views, registration status, and voting plans for the upcoming election. Although we were volunteers for the Donald Trump 2020 reelection campaign, my knock list included a good number of registered Democrats that someone in the office had decided were worth talking with. For the most part, the list was correct and we held several conversations with avid Trump supporters, some of whom were registered Democrats. I was also surprised by the relatively high number of people who not only answered their doors but were willing to talk with us at some length.

This was Mike's first day, but I had been canvassing neighborhoods across northeast Penn-

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1. Names and identifiers have been changed to preserve anonymity.

sylvania for more than a month, and our conversations with voters touched on themes that had become familiar to me. Problems with immigration and a lack of good jobs in the area were layered with economic concerns about the state's "overreaction" to COVID-19. People I spoke with saw the shutdown policy as one that punished hard-working "regular people" but rewarded the owners of big box chains, corporations, and the lazy who were happy to take unemployment payments and stay home. Also, the summer of protest actions in the wake of George Floyd's murder loomed large for many, who expressed concerns about the "riots" in Portland and a hope that Trump would "take the leash off" of the police and National Guard. Many, including Trump-supporting Democrats, lamented the lack of real opportunity in the local economy and hoped that Trump would continue to keep bringing manufacturing jobs back from abroad.

Mike had gone surprisingly silent after we spoke with two voters who were planning to vote for Biden. Although we introduced ourselves as Trump volunteers, both were exceptionally warm. The first voter, an older woman with an oxygen tank, wanted to give us cold bottled water due to the heat of the day. The second offered a line that I heard with some frequency from Biden supporters, "I don't agree with you, but I'm glad that you're out here making democracy work."

After this second conversation, Mike walked with his head down as we made our way toward the next house on our list. I knew that he was nervous about knocking doors because he did not want to get into an argument with someone who disagreed with him, and I assumed this was on his mind. Eventually he let out a sigh and shook his head. "I gotta say I have a sick feeling in my stomach every time I hear someone says, 'I'm voting for Biden.' But I don't judge. . . . I'm not judging, you know what I mean? But I don't get it, I just don't understand it." I nodded along, adding that at least they were nice.

I let Mike take the lead at the next door, and it quickly became clear why Biden voters made him sick to his stomach, and it wasn't just about jobs. At this stop, Mike built a strong rapport with Judy and Chris over their mutual be-

lief in a host of theories drawn from the likes of InfoWars and QAnon. At root was the belief that Democratic Party elites like the Clintons were all deeply corrupt and many of them pedophiles, using their political power to protect their "sick" lifestyles of satanic rituals, teenage abduction, and "Epstein Island" parties. Biden, for his part, was a racist whose corruption was easy to see from the way that his son Hunter Biden was able to receive multimillion dollar payouts from Ukraine and China. The COVID-19 pandemic, though not entirely a hoax, would disappear a few days after the election in states like Pennsylvania that were controlled by Democratic governors. The unemployment and economic pain caused by the lockdown was primarily a political ploy to hurt Americans and make Trump look bad.

From their perspective, the Democratic Party was best understood as an active force against what is good and righteous in America. Chris put it this way: "If the Democrats would have just left [Trump] alone and let him do his job, do you know how much more he would have accomplished? Do you know how much greater this country would be right now? It's like he's trying to build the country up and the Democrats are trying to just rip it right down."

Judy agreed: "Well, you tell me, why is everything on the Democrat side a crisis and an existential threat? I'm sick of their rhetoric. . . . the minute the Right calls something out, it's suddenly a 'conspiracy theory.' We're going to start calling the Left out on their leftist conspiracy theories! We are not racist. That word's been overused to the point that it's taken away the meaning of the word. We're not racist toward anybody." For Judy and Chris, it was clear that the Democratic Party was intentionally dividing the country while laying the groundwork for stealing the election through the mail-in vote (which Judy characterized as "bullshit").

These opinions of the Democrats lent emotional fire to mainstream concerns about the economy. Trump had presided over the best economy in recent memory and his leadership was necessary for the country to rebound after the pandemic. And if Biden were to win? "We're dead. We're done." Their hope was that Trump would win reelection and usher in a new age of prosperity that would celebrate the lives of his

supporters and sweep out the filth and corruption. Judy made her point to the television behind her where Biden could be seen talking on the news, "Go take your pedophilia, your adrenochrome, and get the hell out of our country."[2] If that's your perspective of the Democratic Party, no wonder one would have an upset stomach.

INTRODUCTION

How do anxieties over status loss translate into support for the right-wing populism of the Trump era? Drawing on ethnographic and interview research of the 2020 presidential election, I argue that the motivations of Trump supporters are not only about surface-level concerns regarding immigration and the economy. In my fieldwork, I found people deeply connected to a pitched battle over the future of the country. Although this battle included disagreements around policy, ideology, and partisanship, the conflict might be best captured as a disagreement over what Cecelia Ridgeway refers to as shared status beliefs (2019). For Ridgeway, status is a "a comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honor, and respect accorded to them" (1). When status is typically distributed to those who can deliver on shared goals, conflicts arise over the shared beliefs about what sorts of efforts and what types of people are more or less worthy of receiving status. The outcome is that societies rank groups based on social differences, and groups presumed to be "better" for society are perceived as more worthy of status.

The ongoing demographic, economic, and political changes in the contemporary United States feeds directly into concerns about status. Who does society think is competent? Who ultimately deserves respect? What happens to those no longer deemed capable and worthy of social esteem under neoliberalism? How people make sense of these changes will influence how they make political choices—will they withdraw from the public space or politicize? When politicization does occur, how will it engage with status quo understandings of capital-

ism and democracy? For many of the Trump supporters I encountered in northeastern Pennsylvania, status concerns were not simply about the loss of economic opportunity, but also about the perceived injustice of status loss relative to competing notions of status worthiness that political opponents offered. Attention to this conflict helps explain how status concerns led to political mobilization rather than to withdrawal and the dominance of right-wing over left-wing populism in its content.

In this article, I use a multilevel process of collective identity politicization framework developed by Marjoka van Doorn, Jacomijne Prins, and Saskia Welshen (2013) to explain the role of status in the political motivations of Trump supporters. In this framework, meso-level political actors leverage macro-social imbalances of power and status in society to develop frames designed to coalesce and politicize collective identities on the micro level of individual meaning making and interpersonal interactions.

I begin with a brief overview of how this process unfolded in the 2020 election. Drawing on broad social cleavages of race, class, and partisanship, the "identity entrepreneurs" of party elites and staffers transformed this raw material into compelling frames that sought to shape how individuals made sense of themselves within the world and acted within it. Candidates and organizers offered narratives that cast hard-working Americans as unjustly hurt by corrupt, elite politicians from both parties who not only saw no value in the working people of the United States but also actively sought to destroy them and their country. These frames constructed a populist notion of the righteous "American people" who are called to fight against the domination and oppression of those in power. The frames thus combine the status concerns of the working class with a sense of righteous injustice about their loss of status alongside a normative vision of how the country's problems could be solved by recentering conservative working-class status beliefs. On an interpersonal level, individual Trump supporters become politicized when

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2. Adrenochrome is the oxidized variant of adrenaline that some QAnon supporters believe is harvested from tortured children to be used as a psychedelic drug by global elites (Hitt 2020; Friedberg 2020).

they become aware of and involved with "their shared group membership, their common enemy or opponent, and especially the wider societal struggle that is affected by and affects" the contest of the election (Simon and Klandermans 2001, 324). The political action of Trump supporters was spurred through emotionally laden rejections of status beliefs that did not center working-class values of hard work, manual occupations, and small-town family-centric culture. For many, the Democratic Party coalition represented a set of status beliefs that celebrated "bullshit" service and professional work, overvalued "liberal" college education, and exalted out-groups such as "illegal immigrants," "Silicon Valley CEOs," and the "lazy unemployed" over "hard-working Americans." Further, beliefs about cultural elitism, electoral fraud, and conspiracism framed the Democratic Party as one defined by corruption, authoritarianism, and moral decay. Taken together, most Trump supporters saw these status beliefs not only as incorrect and unfair, but also as dominant and oppressive, legitimating resistance to these beliefs as righteous opposition to an oppressive status regime.

This analysis draws on five months of participant observation as a Trump Reelection Campaign volunteer in northeastern Pennsylvania along with roughly seventy interviews conducted during the campaign and through the end of November 2020.[3] I set out with an open-ended interest to understand how Trump supporters made sense of the world and acted within it. In particular, I sought to understand the links between economic and political inequality, right-wing populism, and working-class identity in this part of the Rust Belt.

Most of the people I encountered in the field fit into the broad middle of America's opaque class hierarchy, what Joan Williams argues is the "working class" of our country (2019). Many in northeastern Pennsylvania had real concerns about the continued decay of economic opportunity in the Rust Belt. As other researchers note, in the leadup to the 2016 election many in this category (and especially whites) felt alienated, "left behind," and decentered by changes to the culture and economy of the

United States (Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016). The result was a shared sense of anxiety over a loss of status, one that Diana Mutz argues was a key corollary to support for Trump in 2016 (Mutz 2018). The people I spent time with during the 2020 presidential campaign echoed these concerns, routinely framing their support for Trump as a way to recenter "American values" of individual freedom and merit-based achievement against the Democratic Party's project of cultural elitism and race-based esteem.

Building on this earlier research, I explore the process by which status conflicts evolve—how the discourse is developed, who deploys it in the election, and how campaign volunteers and supporters interpret and enact it. My interest in the dynamic process of how these status conflicts became salient is because neither shared identities nor hardship, whether perceived or empirical, are usually enough to spark political action (van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013) and can even lead to withdrawal from the political system (Gest 2016; McDermott 2006). To spark mobilization, group identities must be politicized. Grievances must be rendered as actionable demands, the divisions between supporters and opponents must be made stark, and emotions must be harnessed to drive political action. Additionally, this process of politicization does not possess an inherent ideological direction—an aggrieved member of the working class could move in either conservative or progressive directions depending on the content and style of the process. As this language implies, the work of *identity entrepreneurs*—political elites and organizers—is crucial in exploring both the form and direction of the politicization process. Earlier research has measured and described the contours of resentment and status anxiety. I trace these developments as part of a dynamic political process.

POLITICAL IDENTITY AND THE LEFT BEHIND

Although the labels of the Industrial Midwest and Rust Belt are still used to describe the set of states from Michigan to Pennsylvania, the

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3. A second set of follow-up interviews is under way and therefore not included in this discussion.

modern character of this region is more accurately characterized by social decline and deindustrialization. More than half (57 percent) of the counties in this region have a lower median household income today than they did in 1980, an economic slide that has occurred alongside decreased life expectancy and a breakdown in social conditions for the working class (Monnat and Brown 2017). These "landscapes of despair," as Shannon Monnat and David Brown refer to them (2017), have endured the worst of a changing economy, where trends of wage polarization are amplified by a skewed spatial distribution of opportunity that favors suburbs and large cities over rural and small-town communities. Such shifts have social consequences, especially in a context where work is not simply an issue of wages but also of personal identity and dignity.

Recent scholarship shows the powerful role of social identity in driving political views and behavior—political action not as a function of ideology or policy preferences but as "a reflection of judgements about where 'people like me' belong" (Achen and Bartles 2017, 266). In this vein, several authors explain the rise of Trumpian politics by showing the explanatory power of racial resentment, group expectations, and status anxiety in the broad construction of group identity and support for Trump (Gidron and Hall 2017; Luttig, Federico, and Lavine 2017; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Mutz 2018). An especially powerful argument involved the activation of white identity among voters (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Some put these findings alongside a renewal of right-wing populist attitudes among voters who see society as a Manichean struggle of "the people" against corrupt elites (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Hawkins et al. 2018). These findings relate to recent scholarship that centers the role of identity among political actors, namely, Katherine Cramer's notion of rural resentment (2016), Justin Gest's theory of white working-class marginality and antisystem politics (2016), and Arlie Hochschild's thesis of "the left behind" (2016). This work helps explain how Trump's 2016 electoral campaign and subsequent administration helped amplify a right-wing populist discourse that relies on status claims, cultural issues, and

economic nationalism in its appeal to voters. President Trump's reelection campaign followed a similar rhetorical strategy, adding new concerns of racial strife and economic depression linked to Black Lives Matter protests and a global pandemic. Americans respond positively to these frames when they resonate with their social identities and their interpretations of how the world works and their place within it.

To the extent that political institutions that previously shielded lower-income citizens from rising economic inequality have been retrenched over time, it is perhaps no surprise that anti-elite populist frames find purchase in such circumstances (Gest 2016; Silva 2019). But the coupling of populism to right-wing politics is not a given, as histories of poverty and oppression among communities of color, immigrants, native peoples, and whites of earlier generations show. And yet Trumpian populism has found fertile soil in some majority white communities with these characteristics (Bradlee 2018). The puzzle is why, and by what processes, have these politics taken shape in such communities.

CASE SELECTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

President Trump won the electoral college with surprising support throughout the Rust Belt, which backed Obama's presidency in 2008 and 2012. The 2016 Trump coalition was, from a national perspective, grounded by voters who were whiter, more affluent, and less educated than Clinton voters. At the same time, Trump's path to victory was through those Rust Belt counties suffering from a variety of distresses since the 1908s, counties that Shannon Monnat and David Brown refer to as "landscapes of despair": "In particular, economic distress (rates of SSI [Supplemental Security Income] receipt, poverty, unemployment/not in labor force, uninsured), health distress (rates of disability, obesity, poor/fair self-rated health, smoking, and drug, alcohol, and suicide mortality), and social distress (rates of separation/divorce, single parent families, vacant housing units, persistent population loss) were strong predictors of Trump over-performance [at the county level in the Rust Belt]. These relationships held even

when controlling for metropolitan status" (2017, 229).

Luzerne County in northeastern Pennsylvania, population 317,646 (80.4 percent non-Hispanic white, 12.8 percent Hispanic-Latino, 6.3 percent black–African American), is emblematic of the trends of economic and social distress and was one the handful of counties studied in this project (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Given the characteristics I describe here, this county is a "paradigmatic case" for exploring the political lives of white political actors in the context of modern economic inequality and an uneven spatial distribution of opportunity (Flyvbjerg 2001, 80). Obama won the county, which is historically Democratic, by 8.4 percent in 2008 and 4.8 percent in 2012. Yet Trump won by 19 percent, the largest landslide in county history. Such a recent and dramatic shift in voting behavior suggests changes in how citizens are interpreting their economic and political straights, making the county an extreme case of shifting voter preferences (Flyvbjerg 2001, 78).

Further, these changes are especially telling given the economic and demographic history of the region. The former Democratic majority in northeastern Pennsylvania stems from a history of union manufacturing, coal mining, and white ethnic groups—mainly Italian, Polish, Russian, and Irish (Bradlee 2018). The salience of these identities has changed alongside the economy, and ethnic white identities have also shifted as the population is mainly fourth- and fifth-generation immigrants. Thus, many voters in the area are not rural conservatives but are rather the ambiguous white working class that both formed the former base of the Democratic Party and were the focus of much hand-wringing on the Left after the 2016 election.

Finally, the county embodies the political implications of landscapes of despair and its correlation with support for Trump (Monnat and Brown 2017). Economic despair is a lived experience in this area: median household income has not increased since 1980, a quarter of adults were unemployed before the pandemic, and many young adults leave the community for better economic prospects (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Claiming the highest mortality rate for middle-age whites in the state outside of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the county is emblematic of the "deaths of despair" thesis that links rising white mortality rates to economic and social hopelessness (Case and Deaton 2017). The majority white community in the county suffers from significant drug abuse problems. Indeed, overdose deaths have doubled each year since 2015 and suicide rates have doubled in the past ten years and remain more than 30 percent higher than the national average. Alcohol abuse is also an issue, the area sporting the twin distinctions of some of the highest per-capita liquor licenses and alcoholics anonymous groups in the country.

To explore the relationship between the Trump campaign, the social identities of supporters, and populism, I designed an ethnographic and interview study of the 2020 electoral cycle. I used an insider perspective to explore how actors negotiate power relationships and identity within meaningful political experiences (Schatz 2009; Pachirat 2009). The core of the research was participant observation as a campaign volunteer focused on the "ground game" of organizing, canvassing, and mobilizing. I supplemented this with interviews conducted during and after the fieldwork. Unlike earlier research on this topic, I focused not only on the general public, but also on the relationships between the public and the identity entrepreneurs of candidates, organizers, and political elites as they deployed "identity strategies with the goal of changing individuals, culture, institutions, and the state" (van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013, xvii). Thus I sought to capture the dynamism of campaign work and how it impacted the identity politics of voters.

Specifically, as a political ethnographer, I volunteered for the Trump Reelection Campaign during the 2020 campaign cycle from June through November in northeastern Pennsylvania. This was not a covert project—staff members and regular volunteers knew that my presence was part of a research project. In the field, I participated in canvassing (or door-knocking), phone-banking, and event support as key sites of inquiry. In addition to formal events and tasks, I also focused on off-stage conversations that happened between meetings, phone-calls, and events, as actors re-

flected on and strategized around the efficacy of their framing work. By living full-time in the community, I also attended nonelectoral events for a deeper understanding of the political culture of the area, such as All Lives Matter and Back The Blue events. In some settings—such as those with large numbers of attendees, fluid conversations, or while canvassing—I did not explain my role as a researcher and, following my institution-approved research design, did not collect identifiers.

Given the nature of the research, my identity was an important component of my participation and interpretation in the field. As a white male in my late thirties, I drew on my working-class background and years of experience in the skilled trades to connect with a population that had similar life experiences. Although I tried to steer conversations toward the experiences of the people I engaged with, I was open about my political views— critical of elite control in both parties, supportive of policies that help the working class, and fascinated by both Trump and the future of the Republican Party. I offered criticisms of both candidates when asked. My research benefited from an early start in July, in that by the time the election heated up I was often the volunteer with the most experience and who knew the most people—for example, in the vignette just described I had been tasked with training Mike how to canvass. Most people understood me as an active volunteer.[4] Those with whom I had repeated interactions would often come to me with questions about American politics or the constitution, given my status as a professor.[5] For the most part, people were not interested in my role as a researcher, though I would occasionally be told, "you have to put this in your book."

The details of the method were simple and emphasized engaging people in conversations. As a canvasser I was tasked with knocking doors on select houses to inquire about things such as voter registry, candidate preferences, and plans for voting. The required tasks as a canvasser were minimal—using a smart phone app to input answers to a handful of basic survey questions—but the interactions would routinely lead to longer conversations about the election and the state of the country. Other research moments, such as events and parties, were less structured yet followed a similar agenda of engaging people in open-ended political conversation. Given that most of these moments were political in nature, and that by late August I was a known entity to most regular volunteers and staffers, this was a straightforward task. These conversations would range in many directions but would usually include some discussion on both COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. Additionally, I would ask people their opinions about Trump with a variant of "why do you think people are so excited about the president?" I did little of what campaign staff might call "persuasion canvassing" designed to change people's votes. For one, the campaign infrastructure never included this approach. At the same time, most of the people I engaged with had made their mind up already, and I spoke with few undecided or persuadable people.

Overall, this positionality allowed me to observe and participate in the dynamic processes of identity strategy development, deployment, and interpretation that occurred among actors. Thus I both observed and experienced these processes firsthand—when campaign actors enacted identity strategies, I was a target of those strategies while participating in their deployment among voters. In some cases, my re-

4. One volunteer I spoke with characterized my work this way: "In fact, when I volunteered for working the Trump thing, about three people mentioned your name, you were really active, and you knew what was going on. And that you were very good at conveying what the election was all about. And they needed somebody to work the table. And I said, 'Well, I'll tell you what . . . I want to work with [Biko] because I don't want to learn the wrong way.'"

5. Typically, these conversations would go in fruitful directions, but not always. For example, one particularly active married couple asked me about the different ways that Trump and Biden presidencies would affect the economy. When I explained how the president's ability to directly affect the economy was more limited than we might think, they took this as a rejection of Trump's direct ability to reduce unemployment (and Biden's desire and agency to increase it), and refused to talk to me from that point on.

lationship allowed me to observe how these strategies were developed in real time.

Crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic did not negatively affect my ability to conduct fieldwork. In response to Pennsylvania public health policy, the campaign either ignored policy, moved events out of doors, or strategically labeled gatherings as peaceful protests (a reference to the large crowds at Black Lives Matter protests across the country). Indeed, the discourse of COVID-19 among the campaign and voters was an avenue that Trump supporters use to distinguish themselves from others who feared what they perceived as an overblown and politically manipulated crisis.

Finally, a note about the population with whom I interacted. The Republican Party is a coalition of interest groups with a wide spectrum of political beliefs across individuals and geographic areas. The Trump supporters I interacted with included militia members, single-issue voters, libertarians, business people, and out-of-touch voters who expressed ignorance about the election but were motivated to vote for their party or candidate. Indeed, a handful of supporters I met were both infatuated with the president while simultaneously proud that they were not registered to vote and had no intention of doing so.

Although my experience canvassing potential voters offers some insights into all these groups, most of my interactions and the focus of this research were with dedicated Trump supporters who participated in ways beyond voting. Knocking on doors, managing the local campaign offices, helping at events, or distributing lawn signs, this group is probably best framed as Trump's base of support. Their policy issues or ideological goals of course varied, but they were unified by a belief in Trump's personal and political narratives, a belief in his success as president, and scathing critiques of the Democratic Party. Although my method does not allow for precise demographic measures of the people I worked with, my impressions were that they generally fit into the broad working class as Joan Williams defines it, those 53 percent of Americans who are neither rich nor poor: "As of 2015, these families had incomes ranging from $41,005 to $131,962. Their median in-

come was $75,144. At the high end are married families of, for example, a radiation therapist (median pay $70,010) and a police officer (median pay $60,270)" (2019, 33).

My experience with these supporters mirrored Williams's argument about the working class encompassing economic and cultural themes. Trump supporters who wanted more economic opportunity were not interested in minimum-wage jobs with a higher rate. Instead, they wanted high-status occupations that would replace the former coal and manufacturing jobs that many nostalgically framed as hard but dignified. Culturally, they wanted to preserve the positives of what many called the "real America" of close-knit communities, religious attendance, traditional gender norms, and the American Dream of dignified work opportunities that led to economic prosperity across generations. Some narratives of Trump supporters frame them as hostile and confrontational, but my experiences with people across northeastern Pennsylvania were almost exclusively friendly, warm, and engaging.

THE MULTILEVEL PROCESS OF POLITICIZATION

In my time volunteering with the campaign, the sense of status loss was pervasive. Given a context of perceived status loss, we might expect some to succumb to disempowering self-criticism or withdraw from the political arena (McDermott 2006; Gest 2016). Hardship alone, real or otherwise, does not automatically translate to political mobilization. Further, the ideological character of political claims does not automatically follow from the nature of hardship: economic distress does not automatically turn one into either a die-hard socialist or right-wing populist. Yet I found a group of engaged political actors with defined grievances mobilized by a campaign that helped shape these grievances and give them political direction. How did status loss (or at least the anxiety about losing status) translate into support for Trumpian right-wing populism? In the next section, I draw on fieldwork and interviews to explain the connections.

The explanation begins with a narrative of status loss across economic, cultural, and political themes. Although the empirical research

questions whether Trump voters have truly lost their social dominance, perceptions of status loss were abundant in northeastern Pennsylvania. To this we can add a theme of righteous injustice, where people felt not only that their group has lost status in society, but also that this outcome was a violation of deeply held values of fairness. Political elites amplified and framed these concerns into a political campaign with a call to action—voting for Trump. The combination of emotion and conspiracy theories both cast opponents as people with a starkly different set of values and provided instrumental value for adherents to make sense of their loss of status while maintaining agency and self-confidence. Conspiracism plays into this as an input of meaning making that stitches the parts together by drawing clear moral boundaries between Trump supporters and "evil" Democrats, anti-Trump Republicans, and cultural elites of all types.

To illuminate this process, I turn to scholarship on social movement mobilization that examines how individuals come to see themselves as part of a collective identity, and how that identity is in turn politicized to achieve some social end. In particular, I use the framework that Marjoka van Doorn, Jacomijne Prins, and Saskia Welshen developed to explain the multilevel process of collective identity politicization among Trump supporters (2013). As described in the following section, this process involves meso-level political elites drawing on macro-level social categories to develop collective action frames for potential supporters. Interpersonal interactions on the micro level accept, reject, strengthen, or weaken these frames to the extent they take on the collective identities they offer and take action in ways that fit into the framework.

Macro Cleavages: Economic Anxieties, Cultural Performances, and Political Alienation

We begin on the macro level, where social cleavages provide the starting point for the development of politicized grievances. This is the endoxa, or "the background conceptions of the way the world is" that actors hold (Woodly 2015, 8). The sense of economic, cultural, and political loss just described can be thought of as this

"raw material" that groups and individuals will use to make sense of the world.

As Diana Mutz shows in her work on the 2016 election, the notion of economic anxiety as the root of Trump's support may be a chimera, with individual financial well-being having little impact on vote choice (2018). Instead, Mutz argues that anxiety about racial diversity and the global ascendence of China were stronger drivers for Trump supporters. John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck add to this argument, showing how individual economic circumstances were only weakly related to vote choice in 2012 and 2016 (2018). They show that the economic anxiety of Trump supporters is instead tightly bound to race and identity. This "racialized economics" is driven by status concerns, "the belief that undeserving groups are getting ahead while your group is left behind" (2018, 368).

Among the Trump supporters I encountered, economic opportunity was seen as the primary issue their communities faced. These concerns were sometimes, but not always, explained in personal experiences but always linked to the broader community. Thus, following Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, individual economic concerns were outweighed by group and community-level anxieties about the economy. They saw the economic decay in their community and the lack of opportunities for most people (especially younger generations) and feared that this process would continue until there was nothing left. For example, although most noted that jobs were available, they were not particularly good jobs. Few offered better than $10 or $11 dollars an hour and finding work that offered benefits was a challenge. As one middle-class person with a steady government job described it, "There are plenty of shit jobs here, but no careers."

This understanding about careers gets to the status concerns that interact with notions of economic anxiety. Economics are not simply about individual jobs and income, but also about status-related occupational choices that shape the character of multigenerational communities. Temporary work and low-skilled service jobs were plentiful but seen as a dead-end. The idea of increasing the minimum wage and social benefits such that a low-skilled

worker could have a reasonable income and government-provided health care missed the point of people who wanted meaningful careers in industries they saw as dignified and prestigious. Even the warehouse work that promised higher wages and some degree of stability were seen as poor choices relative to the coal mining and manufacturing jobs of earlier generations. For those who had employment in more prestigious occupations—such as fracking or beverage packing—their jobs were a clear source of pride. Fracking workers, in particular, were held in high esteem as part of the nation's energy independence and national security apparatus. But demand far outweighed supply for these types of jobs.

Related to these occupational concerns was the belief that younger generations had to leave the community to find success. Although people wanted what was best for their children, most lamented the situation and wish they could stay: "I went to [a high school] where the mantra was, if you have any sort of potential, you pack your bags and you get out of town. That's sort of across [northeastern Pennsylvania]. The message is if you have any sort of potential you go, and it doesn't matter where you go. As long as you're not here, you were defined as a success. I think in the eyes of most people, there's a stigma to people who stick around."

The lack of "real" economic opportunities was, for many, related to a broader sense of the loss of community. This was a lived experience and the background for many people I spoke with, regardless of their political affiliation.

Throughout my fieldwork, Trump supporters had a sense that their cultural norms were at odds with what they saw in mainstream media and entertainment. This covered a wide variety of cultural practices, from everyday consumer items such as coffee and fast-food preferences to overtly political practices such as singing the national anthem at social events and conservative norms of gender practices. At the same time, the performance of rural working class was ubiquitous, and pickup trucks, Carhartt clothing, and country music dominated social events. I experienced few instances of what might be thought of as Country Club, Wall Street, or otherwise wealthy elite conservativism during my fieldwork.

Layered onto this was a notion that they were seen by Democrats and progressive elites as "rednecks," "white trash," or "ignorant." For Trump supporters, this was always associated with false accusations of racism—the belief that cultural values that connected hard work to deservedness had been twisted by their accusers to denigrate a way of life that all felt was endemic to an American identity of individual achievement and economic mobility. Taken together, these cultural tensions led many Trump supporters to feel under attack, viewing their opponents as antifreedom, totalitarian, and in favor of autocratic "thought police" policies.

Political alienation was common in how Trump supporters described their engagement before 2016. In terms of partisanship, most Trump supporters identified as Republican although a substantial minority were former Democrats or Obama voters. But for many the allegiance was less to the party in general than to Trump specifically. Sharp criticisms of non-Trump Republicans were universal, and both Bush presidencies were often linked with Obama as partly to blame for the lack of economic opportunity in the area. Although many had voted in previous elections, the excitement about Trump was universally novel for supporters. Some dedicated volunteers had not even voted in 2016 given a historical distrust of both parties.

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartles best capture the root of this partisan alienation. If partisanship is linked to social identify, "a reflection of judgements about where 'people like me' belong," than many Trump supporters I spoke with felt weak ties to both parties (2017, 266). Former Democrats felt that the Obama years had revealed a party more interested in Silicon Valley billionaires, immigrants, and cosmopolitan city dwellers than "hard-working Americans." The Republican Party was seen as a different version of this, given Bush's approach to immigration and a sense that the party was more cued to elites than regular people. People may have voted for Bush, Obama, or Romney, but many did not feel that either party was a place for people like them.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, perceptions of status loss were abundant: A national culture

that no longer saw value in working-class practices except as a punch line and simultaneously reduced the dignity of manual trades in traditional occupations. An economy that had left the Rust Belt behind, reducing the material value of traditional work in favor of the service and knowledge economy. Political parties that for generations had made promises to bring back jobs and return to an older, more dignified way of life, but failed to make good on their promises. Throughout it all, a sense of deprivation was linked with unmet expectations of status and compounded by perceptions of elite favoritism of undeserving groups. Among the Trump supporters I spent time with, the notion was strong that "people like me" were the backbone of the country but simply didn't matter before Trump came on the scene. And yet these experiences and perceptions alone are not enough to spark politicization.

Meso Frames of Injustice and Political Agency

Political leaders and organizers—or identity entrepreneurs in the social movement literature—use these macro-social themes at the mesolevel, where they "to try to manipulate the significance of social cleavages. They try to steer the attention of certain opposing collective identities and not to others" (van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 65). Elite messaging, pro-Trump media, party operatives, and Trump himself leveraged macrolevel concerns about status loss to develop coherent narratives about how people should interpret the state of the world and their lives. We might think of this process as one of developing collective action frames that "render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action" (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). In this section, I consider the framing work of identity entrepreneurs in the campaign as they developed and deployed narratives designed to shape how individuals made sense of the political world.

To begin with, the overall message did not cast Trump supporters as members of a dominant or powerful social group at odds with an insurgent opponent. Instead, they were cast as being on the losing side of a long battle against economic and cultural changes that were coun-

ter to their values and that affected their lives, the lives of their children, and their communities in material and symbolic ways. The framing of this group as not dominant was crucial for building an empowered collective identity. It explained group loss through the imposition of hardship by outside forces and made experiences of marginality something imposed rather than a product of failure or deficiency.

The identity entrepreneurs of the campaign offered a collective identity to Trump supporters that took this idea of unfairly imposed grievances and wove it into social cleavages of group identity, class, and partisanship. Narratives around race and ethnicity were complicated, and practically everyone I interacted with went to great lengths to express how they were not racist. At the same time, the imbalance of power between races was clear to most people—a cultural, economic, and political preference among elites for immigrants and people of color at the expense of both "regular Americans" and their valued notions of hard work and equal opportunity. A local candidate wove cleavages about race and ethnicity within a partisan tone that produced clear boundary work between Us and Them.

> [My Democratic opponent] sent $1,200 stimulus checks to illegal immigrants. Do you all support that? Oh, what kind of guy is that? What is he thinking? But you know, but he matches the modern Democratic Party. Yes, Kamala Harris, and AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] and Ilhan Omar, they think *we're* the problem. They think that we're, you know, racist, we hate people. We love everybody! We want everybody to have an equal opportunity and an equal shot. And under President Trump, we had the best economy ever in northeastern Pennsylvania . . . He will finally stand up to China for all the things they have done to us over the years, to finally make China pay for the coronavirus lies, and for the stolen manufacturing jobs that have left our people out of work. But it's on us. They will never stop. The liberals will never ever, ever stop. We have to stop them. . . . And I promise you, I will never forget who I am. I will never forget where I came from. And I will never forget you, the people I represent.

One volunteer expressed their view of this frame as follows: "People were fed up with being called racist or being called a redneck. Like they just wanted to sign out of the identity politics that people played, and sort of blaming of white people. And then Trump walks in. I don't think he was a racist or anything like that. But I think he was certainly the type of guy that's like, 'I'm not for the Mexicans. I'm not for Muslims. I'm for *you*, Americans who are losing their jobs, because that's what we need to focus on right now.'"

A common theme was to reject racial animus by both explicating how the Democrats were the true racists and offering personal stories to validate their openness to racial views. One canvasser puts both together.

> The Democratic Party, they were, you know, pro slave. And then the Republicans are the ones that, you know, ended slavery. And it was the Democrats who formed the KKK [Ku Klux Klan] and the Republicans fought back, you know, so black people could defend themselves . . . and when [Biden] does speak, and can actually, you know, put together a sentence (laughs), a lot of racism comes out. You know, 'if you don't vote for me, then you ain't black.' Right? You know, he talked about being in a swimming pool and having roaches run over his hands when he referred to black children. Like, my ex-girlfriend is black, but we're still really good friends. And her two daughters both are black, you know, I look at them as my own. So I don't play that race crap at all.

Unlike racist Democratic candidates who engaged in overt discrimination, Trump was understood as someone who would support anyone, regardless of race, who was willing to work hard and follow the rules. Trump supporters in northeastern Pennsylvania also offered strong endorsements of immigration, provided that immigrants went through the perceived proper legal channels. Latino immigrants were seen as particularly deserving—hard working, church going, and family oriented. Undocumented immigrants were generally cast in key roles of community breakdown, from the loss of jobs to below-minimum-wage workers to

criminal activity associated with the drug trade. Taken together, Trump supporters adhered to what Lawrence Bobo refers to as "laissez-faire racism," where racial inequity is explained via meritocratic arguments of the failure of black Americans to succeed in the race-neutral capitalist marketplace (1999).

The second social cleavage is one of class, which casts coastal elites, Hollywood, sports figures, and billionaires as villains who drive the processes of status loss. Whereas Trump fights for "people like you," these figures are seen as the powerholders driving the economic and cultural changes that have led to status loss in the first place. The same Republican candidate in the previous quote drove this home in a speech to a small group of supporters:

> Here's what we know about [my opponent]. He isn't one of us. He doesn't live like us. Anyone here have a private jet? Anyone here have a yacht? Anybody here have four vacation homes? Well, I don't either. I don't have any of those things. I have one thing. I have a work ethic. I work my ass off. I grew up working construction. My grandfather was a coal miner from Italy. A lot of folks in the audience, your grandparents came over here and try to make a better life. That's what we're about in northeastern Pennsylvania. We love our God. We love our guns. We love our religion. And we love our president.

A national campaign figure offered a similar narrative about the elitism of the Democratic Party: "And [The Green New Deal] sounds so good but none of these hypocritical Democrats who promoted it actually live by it. AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] flies around on a plane, but she tells you not to fly around on a plane. Nancy Pelosi tells you, you can't go to your beauty parlor, but she can go to her beauty parlor. And that's the whole core of liberalism. It's a bunch of hypocrisy. They want you to live by a different standard and wreck our economy, wreck what makes our country great."

Class issues overlap with general notions of moral difference, which is framed as Trump Republicans against corrupt and immoral elites in both parties. Party organizers provide several narratives to this end, including the notion

that Democrats look down on Trump supporters. A local politician provided the following frame during a campaign event: "We also know what the other side thinks of us. I mean, they've made it very clear. We remember when Barak Obama said how the people of Pennsylvania that they cling to their guns and their religion. You're damn right we do! And we're proud of it! And you remember when Hillary Clinton called us the deplorables? Well today Joe Biden called us chumps. He called us chumps."

Along with offering these narratives of out-of-touch and judgmental Democratic elites, organizers and campaign actors would also frame Democrats as not simply partisan opponents but as immoral enemies of the country. A national figure from the party discussed the Democratic response to COVID-19 to a small crowd in the following way:

> It's a show! It's not science, it's political bullshit! It's worse than that, it's intended to scare people, its intended to scare people, is intended to keep us . . . [pushes hands down aggressively, someone yells "suppressed" and the speaker nods and points at him]. Do you think our schools have to be closed? You know, the teacher's union says they'll open up on November 7. Do you think that the Democrat governors in a lot of these states are holding the economy down on purpose? They don't give a damn if they're hurtin' people! In my state, they don't care how many people go bankrupt! People are starving, and they don't give a damn. Whatever it takes to beat Trump! We'll starve people, we'll hold back medicines from them. Who the hell knows what they'll do next?

A related narrative cast the historic Democratic Party as one that was worthy of respect—a strategic framing given that many voters in the area were older and former Democratic voters. This allowed speakers to develop a contrast between a previous, acceptable version of Democratic politics and the party as it is today. Two national figures each developed this frame differently:

> The best thing we can do for our Republic is to have an overwhelming defeat of the Demo-

cratic Party right now. They will then go back into reform their party, get rid of the bums, to get rid of the crooks. And they'll go back to a solid American agenda.

> Maybe more liberal than ours . . . but not a socialist agenda. Not a foreign agenda. Not one that allows you to burn the flag, not one that allows you to kneel down when the national anthem is being played, not one that dishonors America, it used to be "blame America" now they hate America! . . . What a bunch of phonies! It's all to hate America! To make us hate our country, make our children hate our country.

> You'd agree this isn't the party of JFK [John F. Kennedy]. This isn't the party of Bill Clinton. I mean, this is a totally unrecognizable party. Every single day they want to censor you. . . . They want to take away your first amendment rights. They want to get rid of religion in this country. You see what they're doing to organize hate in this country. It's disgusting. And Pennsylvania is a faith-based state and people are sick and tired of it. You know, they take out the words under God from the Pledge of Allegiance. I talk about this every single day. They're happy to keep [liquor] stores open, but they want to keep churches closed. So they want to get rid of freedom of speech. They want to get rid of faith in this country.

A former Democrat I spent the day with at a parade enacted this frame when recounting her frustration with a friend of hers: "[My friend] thinks the Democratic Party is still like when JFK [John F. Kennedy] was there. And at one time they were for the working and the middle class. I think the Republican Party under Trump is turning into the middle-class party. I gotta be honest with you. I really do, I think the Democrats are for the super elite, and I think they're for [low-income black and immigrant voters], to keep them poor. Not to help them, but to keep them down so they can control them and then get the votes."

These cleavages are designed to politicize the collective identities of working-class Trump supporters. Different political elites certainly try to deploy different frames to this group, in-

cluding leftists who want to lay the blame on capitalism and the wealthy, and more libertarian-minded conservatives who would encourage people to change with the economic times (more on this second group shortly). Under the Trump narrative, though, the collective identity is one of unfairly imposed grievances by outsiders.

Micro-Conspiracism and Emotion in Interpersonal Framing

We finally turn to the microlevel of the politicization of collective identity, where meaning making processes take place "in interpersonal interactions that strengthen or weaken the ties between group members," often relying on the frames provided by political elites (van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 65). I participated in endless conversations that tilled this ground because campaign volunteers and participants routinely engaged in political conversation on the topics discussed. Key to this is the emotional component, namely, the anger and righteousness frames deployed by party identity entrepreneurs. In this framework, the shared status beliefs of Trump supporters are the correct ones, where status should be allocated through racialized norms of hard work, family loyalty, and local community. The diverse cosmopolitanism of urban elites and the service economy may have temporarily usurped national society, but these status beliefs are simply wrong and immoral.

The emotional content here solves two important issues for politicization. The first is that anger, especially when grounded in perceptions of unfair treatment, is more capable of sparking mobilization than other emotions such as fear or shame (van Zomeren 2013). Given the potential of status loss to lead to political withdrawal and disempowerment, the framework offered by the Trump narrative both defines status anxieties as legitimate grievances and attributes the responsibility of those grievances to opponents. Second, this felt sense of righteous injustice protects this group from criticisms of failure within their own meritocratic ideology of the American Dream. As Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes show, this line of criticism against the white working class can be found in the writing of contemporary conservative authors including Charles Murray, Kevin Williamson, and J. D. Vance (2019, 47–71). Within this conservative narrative, the economic and cultural losses of the white working class are explained via "dependency, behavioral pathos, family breakdown, and cultural disfunction" while ignoring structural explanations of inequality (HoSang and Lowndes 2019, 65). But if the loss of status and dignity are the fault of Democrats, RINOs (Republicans in Name Only), elites, immigrants, and people of color who are the true norm violators of hard work and deservedness, then Trump supporters can retain their belief in meritocracy. They haven't failed so much as they have been cheated.

Within this framework, supporters often explained the appeal of Trump by his focus on jobs and employment early in conversations. As one volunteer summarized it, Trump's platform came down to issues of jobs, with explicit concerns about immigration, race, gender, and social issues as distant seconds (except when specifically concerned with jobs). This volunteer felt that supporters "heard" the job offers, whereas Democrats "heard" overblown concerns about racism and discounted his economic promises.

But economic issues were always bound up in emotional status arguments that enacted the anti-elite narratives provided by party elites. In describing the Trump victory in 2016, many framed it as a broad feeling of the area and the people in it being left behind by society in general and by Democrats and RINOs specifically. As one interviewee put it, the feeling was that eight years of Obama had improved the lives of "everybody who wasn't Us," with explanations that Us included "regular" or "hard-working Americans" who were "sick of being forgotten." The "everybody else" who had benefited under previous administrations included not only social groups such as "illegal immigrants" and "urban people," but also coastal elites, Wall Street bankers, Hollywood actors, wealthy Bush and Romney Republicans, and Silicon Valley executives. The racial and ethnic coding of "who counts" as a "regular American" was routinely combined with strong populist critiques of elites in this way. Clinton's loss in 2016 was in part linked to her perceived position of con-

tinuing the Obama administration's social and economic policies.

One theme tended to dominate microlevel interactions—conspiracism. Discussions of conspiracy theories performed important identity work for participants in building Us versus Them boundaries, developing comparative awareness of the group's unjust position in society, and in negotiation over the meaning of the group's position (Taylor and Whittier 1999; van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013). Here a group of former Democrats (including elected ward leaders) vent about "draining the swamp," drawing on both passion and conspiracism in their discussion:

MIKE: [Trump] is draining the swamp. He's exposing all these—
JANE: Yes!
MIKE: —all these people go in there, not millionaires. And then they're suddenly all millionaires. And they make a lousy couple $1,000 a year—
JULIE: Because they suck us down the drain!
MIKE: —where's that money coming from? That is all our money! They're stealin'. And [Trump] is exposing them, eventually he is going to get as many as he could. That's what I like about him! Get rid of the crooks because they've been in there for forty some years or more. And we can't get them out of there!
JULIE: And it doesn't matter what side they are, whether it is a Democrat or Republican. I really don't care if it's both of them. Get rid of them all! And start over.
DAVID: It's on both sides!
JANE: But why aren't they getting arrested?
DAVID: If [Trump] gets in, you can guarantee, is some of these people are going to jail!
[LOUD EXCLAMATIONS, PEOPLE YELLING OVER EACH OTHER]
BIKO KOENIG: Anyone in particular that you're thinking about, when you're thinking that people should be arrested?
LIZ: Biden and his son. They should be arrested for treason, because I think they sold our country down the drain to China.
JULIE: And let's get Pelosi out of there! They're all getting paid from China. Let's face the facts. China, I really—

JANE: We know movie stars that have picked up and moved, that we know why they moved. Because they know some of this might start unraveling.
BIKO KOENIG: I haven't heard this about movie stars.
JANE: Oh, yeah!
LIZ: Oh, big time.
DAVID: The conspiracy is about a lot of them being involved with Epstein, even Tom Hanks! He moved on. He bought a house in Greece so he wouldn't get caught.
JANE: A lot of this is, they might start unraveling.
JULIE: Oh, absolutely!
JANE: And a lot of stuff coming out. And they're involved with a lot of them. And Pelosi is right on top."

The content of conspiracism varied greatly to include stories of elite pedophilic Satan-worshippers, governors using COVID-19 regulations to impose communism, the organized theft of elections, and belief in a global ruling class that sought to impose its will on America and its people. The threads that unified these themes were their use as clear evidence of widespread corruption among political opponents, and that these opponents (and hence their corruption) could be identified through their resistance to and disapproval of Trump.

As circulated by supporters, this general position performed important boundary work in separating allies from opponents. It also strengthened the claims of righteous injustice: if your political opponents are not only wrong but also deeply corrupt and morally depraved, then your own marginalized position is clearly unjust. Thus, the decentering of Trump supporters is not simply the outcome of politics as usual or a fair economy but instead one of a society-wide battle to save democracy and the country. In articulating the position of Trump supporters in the broader society in this way, it also provides moral ammunition for the rejection of liberal and cosmopolitan status beliefs.

The process of negotiating the meaning of Trump supporters and opponents feeds directly into the logic of right-wing populism that casts the righteous "people" in opposition to the corrupt elite. In the ideational model of pop-

ulism, this binary is strengthened through black and white moral claims of right and wrong (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019). Taken together, the multilevel process of politicization among Trump supporters offers instrumental value for Trumpian leaders to garner power and for supporters to understand their lost status as caused by villainous opponents.

Unlike much social movement activity, the call to action for Trump supporters was relatively easy and low cost. At a minimum, it involved casting a vote but offered a plethora of options to volunteer, donate, or just participate in the spectacle of the election at rallies and events. With the electoral success of 2016, many Trump supporters felt optimistic about his chances for reelection at the same time that they retained their anger over the state of their lives. The framework provided by the Trump campaign thus embodies what Martijn van Zomeren describes as emotion-focused approach coping: "the more strongly individuals appraise external blame for their unfair situation, the more strongly they experience group-based anger and a strong motivation to act collectively" (2013, 85). Given the beliefs of group efficacy layered onto this emotional state, it is no surprise that mesolevel actors found success with their frameworks among Trump voters.

CONCLUSION

Vetra Taylor notes that "it is useful to think of social movements as discursive communities, held together not only by common action and bonds of solidarity but also by identities, symbols, shared identity discourse, and practices of everyday life that attribute participants' experiences to particular forms of social injustice" (2013, 43). American electoral politics was once understood to not deeply penetrate notions of personal identity for most voters. Recent scholarship suggests otherwise, and that polarization can be somewhat explained by the strong bonds between partisanship and identity. As I have described, Trumpian politics has remade the political landscape in part by reshaping and politicizing identities in a dynamic and multilevel process. Drawing on macrolevel social cleavages, mesolevel political actors design and deploy frames that encourage working-class actors to understand their so-

cial, political, and economic losses in ways that place Trump opponents as responsible for these problems and Trumpian politics as the only solution. On the micro level, interpersonal emotional dynamics support and amplify these frames as people experience self-righteous anger and circulate narratives that vilify opponents in stark terms. Through this process, status loss is framed as neither the outcome of meritocratic capitalism nor the result of natural changes to society. Instead, it is a battle between competing sets of status beliefs, where opponents are reviled for their moral transgressions as they intentionally, and unfairly, strip away the status of hard-working Americans.

A key concern coming out of the status scholarship is the relationship of status processes to persistent inequality. As Ridgeway puts it, "status beliefs stabilize structures of inequality between social difference groups by legitimating them on the basis of merit" (2019, 143) For low-status people, it provides them with a means of "justifying and rendering sensible the structure of inequality in which they find themselves" (Ridgeway 2019, 145). As we have seen, many Trump voters reject the justifications for their own status loss but couch them in frames that seek to reestablish a set of merit-based status beliefs grounded in individual achievement and laissez-faire racism. Such a move would continue to produce group-based inequality, perhaps with different arrangements of winners and losers.

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The Architecture of Status Hierarchies: Variations in Structure and Why They Matter for Inequality

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We argue that the properties of status hierarchies, independent of the positions actors occupy within them, have important effects on the degree of inequality in material rewards generated by status processes. We first discuss how a focus on status hierarchies differs from, complements, and extends the traditional focus on individual-level status positions. Drawing on a range of empirical case studies, we then identify three architectural features of status hierarchies—variations in their verticality, the clarity of their distinctions, and their rigidity—that affect the extent of inequality in the rewards received by the incumbents of high versus low status positions. We conclude by highlighting promising research questions and hypotheses that this macroscopic, status hierarchies approach raises.

Status is widely regarded as a fundamental dimension of social stratification (Weber [1922] 1968; Goode 1978; Ridgeway 2019). A shared, foundational premise is that status, rather than being seized as one might seize wealth or power, is the result of one actor voluntarily bestowing another with esteem, respect, credit, or recognition. In short, status as a social asset is how much value other people accord you.

This distinctive nature of status in turn motivates the examination of status hierarchies as the matrix on which people draw when making status attributions. Status hierarchies are sets of relations of social superiority, equality, or inferiority actors perceive among others (Weber [1922] 1968, 932–39; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Goldthorpe 2021). Although these hierarchies shape how actors attribute status to the individuals within them, they are analytically distinct from status inequality—or the overall and often unequal distribution of status across individuals that results from the aggregation of

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myriad status attributions (Berger et al. 1977; Gould 2002; Manzo and Baldassarri 2015; Frey and van de Rijt 2016).

Scholars have theorized the processes that generate status hierarchies as being in a sense universal. At core, hierarchies of perceived worthiness among people are rooted in the standards of value shared by a group or society (Lamont 2012; Ridgeway 2019), so that actors with more of whatever is socially valued typically assume more favorable status positions than those with less. Status hierarchies, therefore, tend to reflect shared cultural beliefs about the relative value of certain achieved—like occupational position or educational achievement—or ascribed attributes—such as birth, gender, or ethnicity (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Ridgeway 2014).[1] They have also been shown to track people's perceptions of the contribution of others to a group's valued goals (Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Anderson and Willer 2014), leading scholars to speculate that status systems evolved as a widespread way of rewarding pro-social behavior in situations of interdependence that are essential to the human condition (Ridgeway 2019).

Yet status hierarchies are anything but uniform: if we take them as the unit of analysis, we see a great deal of variation in their structure or shape across social contexts. Some hierarchies are intensely vertical—they sort actors into a full spectrum of finely ordered status positions—whereas others rest on a mere binary division between high- and low-status actors and are characterized by a lack of verticality. Some are clear cut—wherein every unit can be positioned clearly with respect to every other—while others are ambiguous. Hierarchies can also be more or less fluid over time, given individual mobility across status positions or system-level reshuffling associated with change in a field's valuation criteria. Such differences are more easily identifiable when examining how status hierarchies change over time or vary across contexts.

Understanding the consequences of these "architectural features" of status hierarchies is analytically different from understanding the consequences of occupying any specific position within them. Nevertheless, research that takes the characteristics of status systems as the unit of analysis continues to be rare relative to research investigating how the lives of actors are shaped by the position they inhabit in these systems. The literature is rich and diverse, for example, illuminating the advantages and disadvantages enjoyed by actors with specific status characteristics (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007) or by the incumbents of high versus low status positions (Podolny 1993). Studies of this sort are designed to compare the fates of higher- or lower-status actors, not the macro-level properties of the hierarchies in which these actors are embedded. Another segment of status research examines how actors' status positions shape or constrain the actions and strategies that actors ultimately adopt, such as conformity (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001), network activation (Smith, Menon, and Thompson 2011), or distinctive or conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899; Bourdieu 1984). Here again, the focus is on exploring variation among actors slotted within a hierarchy, not variation across hierarchies. Similarly, conceptual work on status, such as that comparing status with reputation (Podolny 2005; Sorenson 2014; Jensen and Roy 2008) or "robustness" (Bothner, Smith, and White 2010), is grounded in what it means for actors to have more or less of a particular resource. In contrast, conceptual work on entire status systems is uncommon, and has been typically relegated to anthropological case studies—such as the caste system in India (Dumont 1970, 1977; Marriott 1968).

The point of this article is to show that analyzing variations in the characteristics of status hierarchies opens up new avenues for thinking about inequality. Specifically, we argue that foregrounding status hierarchies and their characteristics makes it possible to (1) theorize variations in the architecture of status systems that give them a greater or lesser hierarchical character—or, in other words, that make them more or less "hierarchy like"; and (2) show that

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1. Emerging research, however, suggests that perceived relations of social superiority or inferiority—across occupational categories in particular—are not universally shared but instead vary with people's gender, race, or education (Lynn and Ellerbach 2017; Valentino 2021, 2022).

the characteristics of status hierarchies can exacerbate or mitigate inequality in the material rewards individuals derive from occupying high versus low status positions.

After discussing how a focus on the architecture of status hierarchies complements the insights of classic status research on inequality, we show what an approach taking hierarchies as a unit of analysis may look like. Using examples from a variety of social domains, we take an aerial view of status systems, identifying the structural features of status systems that emerge when comparing systems across time or space.[2] We focus in particular on three aspects of hierarchies' architecture—their greater or lesser verticality, clarity, and rigidity—because they have a proven or suspected link to the degree of inequality in material rewards that is generated by status processes. The overarching theme of our demonstration is that the more vertical, the more clear, and the more rigid—in short, the more hierarchy-like—a status hierarchy, the more inequality in material rewards it begets between the incumbents of high versus low status positions.

STATUS HIERARCHIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY

Status research has devoted considerable attention to unveiling the advantages and disadvantages accruing to incumbents of high versus low status positions. Across a virtually endless range of social contexts, this research shows, actors with more of what a society values tend to garner more favorable material outcomes—such as monetary rewards or other types of tangible opportunities (job offers, promotions, awards, or opportunities to speak)—relative to those with less. The status characteristics literature, for example, stresses the role of status processes in fueling socioeconomic disparities across individuals defined by categorical attributes such as their gender or their race (Correll

and Ridgeway 2003; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2011). The idea behind this approach is that widely held status beliefs associated with these characteristics (men are more competent than women; Whites are more hard working than Blacks) tend to bias the allocation of material rewards in ways that unduly advantage the members of high-status categories. This happens because status beliefs directly bias decision-makers' evaluations of the worthiness of evaluated actors, because status beliefs bias actors' performance by shaping their expectations of their own competence (Correll 2004), or because decision-makers' evaluations are biased by their anticipation of the status beliefs held by third parties whom they expect to interact with evaluated actors (Correll et al. 2017).

Scholarship in economic sociology and organization science also shows that material rewards disproportionably flow to individuals, firms, or products occupying high-status positions because of the tendency of decision-makers to infer quality from status when quality is uncertain (Merton 1968; Podolny 1993; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Because status is a poor tracker of quality (Lynn, Podolny, and Tao 2009), the ultimate allocation of rewards typically diverges from a meritocratic one wherein rewards would be based exclusively on merit or quality.

Given the importance of status distinctions in shaping inequality in "hard" rewards such as money and opportunities for advancement, it is surprising that so little work addresses what status hierarchies look like and what makes them bear more or less powerfully on the distribution of material resources. These questions are sometimes implicit in discussions of status processes, but they tend to remain in the background. For example, in the conclusion to *Status: Why Is It Everywhere? Why Does It Matter?*, Cecilia Ridgeway asks, "Is status inequality inevitable?"

2. Our argument for taking hierarchies as the unit of analysis bears some similarity to Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall's (1993, 1997) development of a comparative world-systems perspective. They advocate that world-system scholars not see the world as just one world-system but instead nested, intersocietal networks, wherein systems would be the unit of analysis and the analytical goal to compare types, such as the "very small systems of egalitarian hunter-gathers (lacking both states and a core/periphery hierarchy)" (Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995, 391) versus the modern global system, which is characterized by a relatively clear, core-semi-periphery-periphery structure (Snyder and Kick 1979; Kick et al. 2014).

Status processes are undeniably a conservative force in society. They slow change in patterns of inequality among individuals and groups and legitimate the status quo. . . . If we are interested in building a more egalitarian society, what can be done to mitigate the effects of status inequality [that is, of status distinctions and hierarchies]? . . . Something as deeply rooted in human culture as status distinctions and status hierarchies is not likely to simply go away. But that does not mean that mitigating some of the most problematic effects of status processes is impossible. (2019, 162)

The solutions Ridgeway envisions to dial down status-driven inequality in material outcomes can be read as efforts to act on the macro-level, structural characteristics of status hierarchies: eroding the power of status beliefs can happen by "narrowing the competence differences that they imply"—that is, by reducing the perceived distance between high- and low-status actors in a hierarchy; similarly, status-based inequality can be undermined by increasing the blurriness of status hierarchies through the multiplication of status orders: "A world without status distinctions may not be achievable . . . a world in which only a few status-valued group identities act as powerful determinants of individual life outcomes is not inevitable. In its place, we might have multiple, cross-cutting status distinctions that result in lower overall levels of inequality among individuals in society" (2019, 163).

These remarks delineate a research agenda for exploring the features of status hierarchies that strengthen or weaken status beliefs, and therefore that heighten or decrease the power of status processes to shape socioeconomic inequality. In this article, we bring these features to the foreground, taking a provisional step toward advancing this agenda. To this end, the three sections that follow describe three dimensions of variation in the overall architecture of status systems: their greater or lesser verticality versus horizontality, clarity versus blurriness, and rigidity versus fluidity. We ar-

gue that status hierarchies exhibiting greater verticality, clarity, or rigidity are more likely to entrench status beliefs and hence to fuel status processes that generate inequality in material outcomes. By contrast, hierarchies that are more horizontal, blurry, or fluid have a tendency to chip away at status beliefs and therefore to undermine inequality-inducing status processes.

Each of the following sections showcases empirical work that illuminates the causal relationships between verticality, clarity, or rigidity and the extent of inequality in the material rewards enjoyed by incumbents of high versus low status positions. Four points are worth stressing about the argument these studies illustrate. First, the argument applies regardless of the criteria status hierarchies are built upon. This means that hierarchies' properties of verticality, clarity, and rigidity can fuel or mitigate outcome inequality between incumbents of high versus low status positions when these positions are rooted in deeply held stereotypes about race or gender (which are not particularly desirable grounds for status and should be irrelevant to the distribution of rewards) as well as when status positions reflect more meritocratic evaluations of ability or quality—as in a performance-based ranking of schools, for example. In short, foregrounding the properties of status hierarchies helps us explain the extent of inequality in rewards between actors at the top and at the bottom of these hierarchies, whoever these actors may be and however their positions may have been achieved.

Second, we argue that status hierarchies' greater verticality, clarity, or rigidity exacerbates inequality in outcomes between high- and low-status actors even though it leaves actors' status positions and relative positions unchanged. Put differently, outcome inequality in our argument is caused by variations in the architectural features of hierarchies, not by changes in the perceived value and relative value of the individuals in these hierarchies.[3] This is because greater verticality, clarity, or rigidity turn status hierarchies into more powerful guides of the action of third parties who in-

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3. Another way of saying this is that greater inequality in outcomes arises from changes in the architecture of status hierarchies that leave status inequality among the actors in these hierarchies unchanged.

teract with the incumbents of these hierarchies: they magnify the role that status and status distinctions play in shaping the material outcomes resulting from these interactions—ultimately generating greater status-based inequality from the same status differences.

Third, foregrounding the characteristics of status hierarchies essentially helps explain variation in the aggregate amount of outcome inequality in a social system (a Gini coefficient type of inequality). This approach complements more traditional status research focusing on disparities in outcomes between individuals with different status characteristics (such as Blacks and Whites or women and men) or positions. Specifically, we argue that although status-based inequality in outcomes between individuals with different characteristics is observed as a form of between-group inequality, it really is a mixture of two inequality-inducing forces. On the one hand, individuals with high versus low status characteristics or positions are rewarded differently. On the other hand, this difference in rewards is made greater or smaller by the architecture of status systems: systems that are more vertical, clear, or rigid have a tendency to compound status-based inequality by making the outcomes of actors at their top and at their bottom pull further apart.

Finally, the flip side of our argument is that manipulating the architecture of status hierarchies to make them less vertical, clear, or rigid should blunt their effect on inequality. In this respect, this article identifies specific levers one might activate to mitigate the effects of status systems without having to alter the status beliefs these systems are based on. By making status systems more horizontal (or by refraining from constructing new ones that are too vertical), by acknowledging that status positions and relative positions are often unclear,

and by regularly updating definitions of value so as to make status hierarchies more fluid, one should reduce the inequality in rewards status systems generate between the actors at their top and those at their bottom. In political and moral philosophy, a similar concern with reducing inequality and achieving a greater egalitarianism by taming hierarchies of esteem and standing is articulated in the work of Elizabeth Anderson (2014, 2017).

VERTICALITY VERSUS HORIZONTALITY: THE DEPTH OF STATUS DISTINCTIONS

One crucial architectural property of status hierarchies is their greater or lesser verticality, or the finer or rougher grain of the status distinctions they rest on. Strongly vertical hierarchies display considerable differentiation of status positions. For example, a full-fledged ranking of a district's schools based on their students' academic achievement might have as many positions as there are schools being ranked. In contrast, more horizontal hierarchies rest on rougher distinctions between broad groups of high versus low status actors, as between members and nonmembers of a prestigious academy or hall of fame, for example.[4]

To further illustrate variation in verticality, consider a comparison between two organizations that share a formal role structure and yet enact dramatically different status systems on the ground. Using ethnographic methods, Hannah Espy and Freda Lynn (2021) examine how status relations are practiced at a Head Start preschool consisting of children mostly from disadvantaged families, on the one hand, and on the other a university-affiliated preschool that charges significantly higher tuition (University Tots). In both schools, the role structure is identical: certified teachers are hired by a formal organization to get two- to

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4. When status is approached with network data measuring how every individual interacts with every other in a social system (see, on food transactions, Marriott 1968; on joint ventures networks, Podolny 2001; on PhD exchange relationships, Burris 2004; on citation networks, Rosvall and Bergstrom 2008; on deference networks among occupations, Freeland and Hoey 2018), the verticality of status hierarchies can be measured using what network methodologists literally refer to as measures of hierarchy (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Accominotti 2008; Czégel and Palla 2015). At bottom, hierarchy measures attempts to quantify the extent to which actors are ordered by their interactions rather than merely connected (Krackhardt 1994).

five-year-old children ready for kindergarten using a curriculum approved by the organization. Nevertheless, through daily practices and rituals, the hierarchies enacted in each space diverge in terms of the depth of status distinctions they create among these various actors (see figure 1).
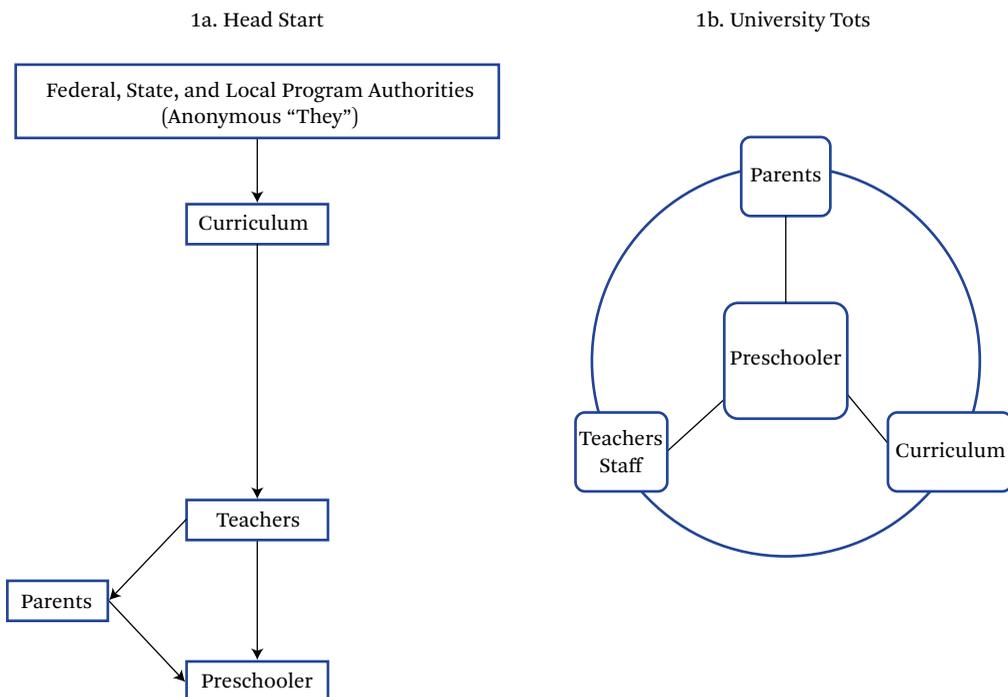
Preschoolers in the Head Start classroom are implicitly taught that they occupy the lowest rung. At the very top is an anonymous, higher authority that controls the curriculum and teachers. The curriculum and teachers, in turn, control students. This hidden lesson is taught, for example, through the denial of negotiating rights when it comes to daily routines (such as going to the bathroom as a group activity at a teacher-controlled time, being instructed to use all colors and fill in all squares during a coloring activity), and teachers routinely using phrasing that conveys blanket subordinate status, such as "we're not allowed to" and "they don't let us." In contrast, at the more advantaged University Tots, preschoolers are implicitly taught that they are located at the center of a web of caretakers working in concert, including teachers, the curriculum, the organization, and their parents, to teach them how to take ownership of their minds and bodies.
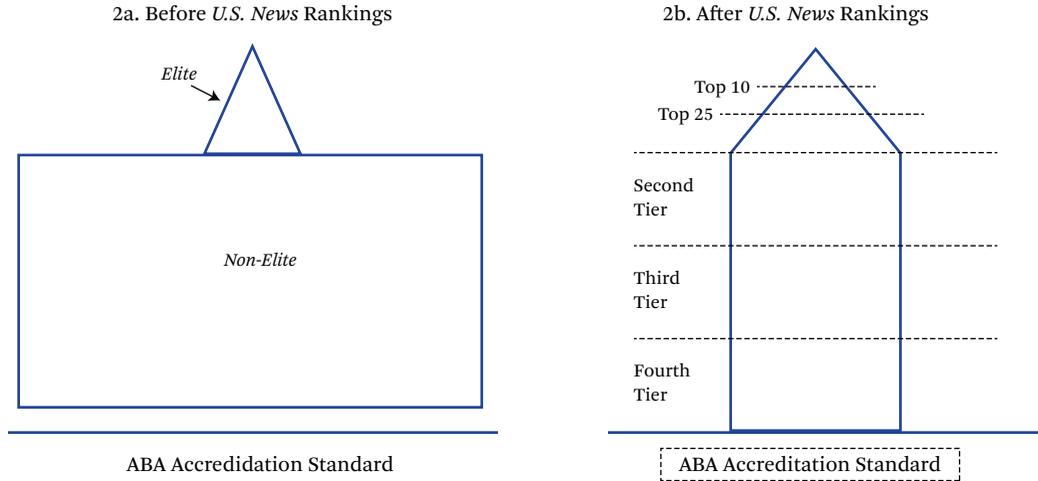
Although the structure of role-relations in both schools is equivalent (preschoolers "belong" to parents and legal guardians, teachers work for the preschool, and teachers instruct preschoolers following the organization-approved curriculum during school day), the symbolic meanings assigned to these relationships and activities differs significantly, which results in two status hierarchies that vary distinctly in their degree of verticality: layers of status subordinates are more numerous at Head Start than at University Tots.

That the greater verticality of status hierarchies can exacerbate inequality in the distribution of material resources among those occupying these hierarchies is illustrated by the transformations of the field of legal education after the introduction of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of U.S. law schools

Figure 1. Status Hierarchies at Head Start (1a) and University Tots (1b) Preschools

1a. Head Start   1b. University Tots

Source: Espy and Lynn 2021.

Figure 2. The Status Hierarchy of the U.S. Legal Education Field

2a. Before *U.S. News* Rankings

Elite

Non-Elite

ABA Accredidation Standard

2b. After *U.S. News* Rankings

Top 10
Top 25
Second Tier
Third Tier
Fourth Tier

ABA Accreditation Standard

Source: Sauder 2006. Reprinted by permission of Springer Nature.

(Sauder 2008; Espeland and Sauder 2016). Figure 2 depicts Michael Sauder's (2006) interpretation of how this field was structured before the rise of the rankings (figure 2a) and after they were established (figure 2b).

The rankings transformed a field that was only loosely differentiated, with the exception of a small elite tier, into a considerably more vertical status ordering with finer-grained status distinctions and more layers of status subordination. This does not mean that schools formerly identified as elite (or non-elite) started enjoying greater (or lesser) status: the status-defining characteristics of schools (their underlying quality) did not change, so that, on average, the perceived quality of elite and non-elite schools likely remained the same. Instead, the introduction of the rankings as a new prism for perceiving quality meant that gradations were now more subtle—that is, more vertical— among the schools in either tier.

As subsequent research explores, greater verticality in the hierarchy's architecture altered the behavior of school administrators regardless of rank, giving rise to widespread anxiety, the implementation of gaming strategies among administrators, and the investment of more resources into status-generating activities (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Most significantly, this manufactured increase in verticality altered the way prospective students and other constituencies such as employers, alumni, or university trustees behaved toward schools, ultimately increasing inequality in the resources top- and bottom-schools were able to attract (Sauder and Lancaster 2006). This example demonstrates how changes in the structure of the status hierarchy can alter the distribution of status-related rewards in a situation where the status-defining characteristics of actors do not change.

CLARITY VERSUS BLURRINESS: THE BRIGHTNESS OF STATUS HIERARCHIES

Another consequential architectural feature of status hierarchies is their greater or lesser brightness, or clarity—by which we mean that every unit in the hierarchy can be positioned unambiguously with respect to every other: it is clearly of higher, lower, or equal status, and in the first two instances it is clear how distant two units are in the hierarchy. Whether status hierarchies are clear cut or blurry, and how this might affect the behavior and outcomes of actors within them, has been addressed as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville's 1856 analysis of status structures in France ahead of the French Revolution (2008). For example, here is Tocqueville on the greater brightness of status distinctions in France relative to England, and how they bred resentment toward the French old regime:

If the English middle classes, far from waging war on the aristocracy, stayed so closely allied to it, this did not come about because the aristocracy was open but rather because its character was blurred and its boundaries unknown. It was less because you could enter its ranks than because you never knew when you had. The result was that anyone close to it was able to belong to it, join with its government, and derive some reflected glory or some profit from its power. But the barrier that separated the French nobility from the other classes, although very easy to cross, was always fixed and obvious. Striking and hateful signs always made it recognizable to those left outside its ranks. Having once crossed over, a man became separated from all those he had just abandoned by privileges which were for them a burden and a humiliation. (95)

Note that Tocqueville incidentally identifies another dimension of the architecture of status hierarchies—their greater or lesser rigidity, or the difficulty for individuals to travel across a hierarchy's status positions (a dimension we turn to in the next section). That the two dimensions are analytically distinct is underlined by the fact that, in Tocqueville's account, pre-revolutionary French society displayed both high levels of clarity and low levels of rigidity.

There are several reasons why relations of social superiority, equality, or inferiority among actors in a field or society may appear bright or blurry, whether to these actors themselves or to outside observers. The first is the work entities responsible for adjudicating value put into ensuring that the hierarchies they create are clear cut and unambiguous. For example, consecrating institutions that elevate individuals to higher-status positions—such as major prizes or academies, but also monarchs charged with ennobling commoners in old regime France—do not just provide accolades of recognition to the individuals they distinguish (English 2005). By delineating and policing

clear-cut, unwavering divides between those they deem worthy of admiration and those they do not, these institutions also work to signal the existence in their field of a clear hierarchy of worthiness (Accominotti 2021a). This explains why consecrating institutions are unlikely to rescind a spot in the ranks of the great, as this flip-flopping of recognition would tend to suggest that greatness in a field is not such a clear thing after all.

The greater or lesser clarity of status hierarchies can further hinge on the concrete design of judgment devices involved in the production of these hierarchies. When it comes to evaluating employee performance in the workplace, for example, narrative evaluations are unlikely to generate clear-cut hierarchies to the same degree that quantified performance metrics would. In fact, quantified metrics have a tendency to erase any blurriness and ambiguity from the hierarchies of perceived value that they create. Relative to more qualitative forms of evaluation, they do not just create orderings: they also introduce orderliness and clarity into the way these orderings present themselves to outside observers (Accominotti 2021b).

A third cause for the greater or lesser clarity of status orderings is the possible presence in a field of multiple arbiters of value (Sauder 2005). If multiple entities are responsible for adjudicating the value of actors in a social system, these entities are unlikely to return fully aligned judgments. Two music critics might disagree on the respective merits of various conductors, for example, thereby introducing greater fuzziness and ambiguity in the way these conductors compare with one another in the eyes of music lovers. If, on the other hand, only one entity confers status, or one entity has overwhelming authoritativeness in regard to others, the possibility of misaligned judgments is precluded and the existence in a field of a bright status order is facilitated (Healy 2017; Accominotti 2021a).[5]

Blurriness might further arise when the

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5. The ambiguity created by a multiplicity of status judges can have important effects for the actors who are the subjects of status judgments. For example, Michael Sauder and Gary Fine (2008) show that business schools—which are evaluated by many different rankers—feel much more freedom to craft their status claims than do law schools, whose status is defined by one dominant ranker. The blurriness brought about by competing status judgments affects how business schools interpret the disciplining power of their status position, and

same actors are slotted in two or more status hierarchies grounded in different sets of values (Lenski 1954; Abbott 1981; Gould 2003; Lamont 2010). For instance, a person may have a status position based on their occupation but a wholly different position based on their ethnicity or education. A university may likewise have inconsistent status positions based on its academic and athletic achievements (Lifschitz, Sauder, and Stevens 2014). While contextual factors will determine which of these positions is salient in a particular situation, the existence of cross-cutting status systems is likely to blur the perceived hierarchy in any of these systems.

Finally, a fifth factor driving clarity or ambiguity lies in the types of cognitive resources observers bring to bear on status systems. For example, Freda Lynn and George Ellerbach (2017) show that people in the United States vary in how they imagine the ordering of occupational titles with respect to social standing (see also Valentino 2021, 2022). Reexamining the same GSS data that for decades was used to bolster the notion of a universal occupational hierarchy (Treiman 1977), they ask how different people envision the entire occupational prestige hierarchy. Their analysis reveals that social location matters for how individuals perceive this hierarchy: those with high levels of education sort jobs that require many years of education into one relatively crisp category that they place atop all others in the occupational hierarchy. People with less education, in contrast, are not nearly as unified in terms of their beliefs about how they rank "good" and "bad" jobs. These findings describe how a group's investment into education supplies them with a cognitive prism that imposes a binary, hierarchical contrast onto a complex field of heterogeneity, simplifying this field toward a clear-cut ordering that is not perceived as distinctly by individuals lacking this cognitive prism.

The clarity or blurriness of status hierarchies matters because it shapes the behavior and outcomes of actors in these hierarchies. Tocqueville ([1856] 2008) argued that too much brightness in status distinctions fuels social resentment toward those at the top of status orders. Importantly for the argument of this article, the greater clarity of status hierarchies can also exacerbate inequality in the rewards individuals receive for occupying high rather than low hierarchical positions. To substantiate this idea, Fabien Accominotti and Daniel Tadmon (2020) asked a panel of participants to divvy up a year-end bonus among a set of three, unequally performing employees based on the reading of their annual performance reviews. They then manipulated the clarity of the status hierarchy among employees—that is, the clarity of employees' levels of performance and relative performance as they appeared to participants— by randomly allocating participants to one of three conditions. In the first, performance evaluations were narrative reviews, which by virtue of being narrative did not overly clarify the relative status positions of the employees. In the second, narrative reviews were accompanied by a clear-cut rating of each employee's performance on a verbal scale ranging from "unacceptable" to "exceptional." In the third, this rating was presented as a numerical score. The second and third conditions therefore introduced increasingly great clarity to how employees' performances compared to one another, without altering employees' reported levels of performance or relative performance.

Accominotti and Tadmon's findings demonstrate that the brighter the status hierarchy, the more unequally participants rewarded the three employees (figure 3). Compared with the blurrier condition where performance was presented in narrative format, the Gini coefficient measuring inequality in the rewards received by high versus low performers increased by 20 percent on average when performance appeared as a clear-cut rating, and by another 10 percent when performance was shown as a numerical score. The authors go on to show that this happens because clarity increases trust in evaluation and because it makes participants understand performance in more hierarchical terms. Their findings provide further evidence that altering certain architectural characteristics of status hierarchies—here, increasing their clarity—can fuel inequality in the rewards

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this interpretation in turn affects how status judgments shape these schools' behavior (see also Brandtner 2017).

Figure 3. Average Bonuses Received by High-, Medium-, and Low-Performing Employees in Three, Increasingly Clear Experimental Conditions
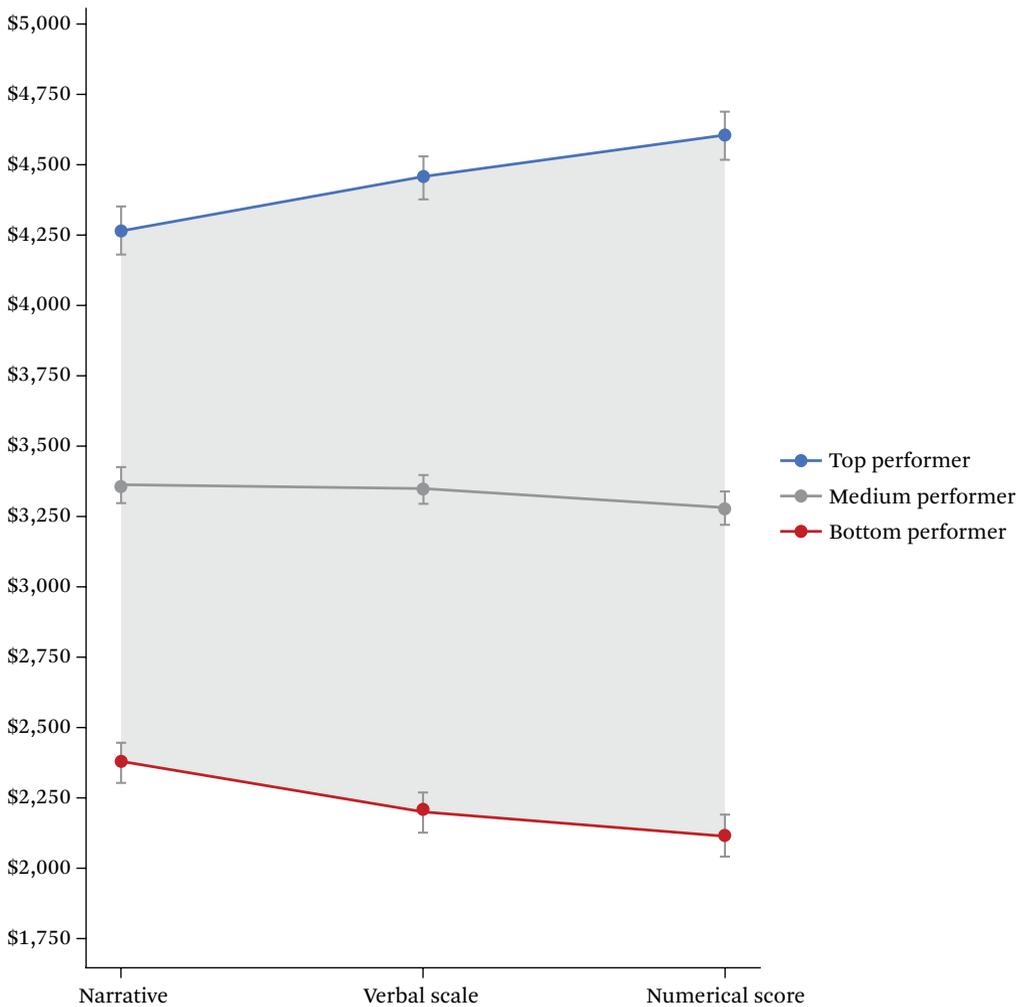
Source: Accominotti and Tadmon 2020.

actors derive from their high versus low status positions, even when these actors' status positions and relative positions are left unchanged.

RIGIDITY VERSUS FLUIDITY: THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHURN OF STATUS HIERARCHIES

Properties of hierarchies are measured at a given point of time, but hierarchies are not static objects. We call attention to two types of fluidity—and their counterpart types of rigidity—that are key to examining hierarchies as social objects. By fluidity or churn, we refer to the propensity of individuals to change posi-

tion in a status hierarchy over time, for example, by going from low to high status.

A system's *internal fluidity* describes the extent to which actors or objects nested within the system move status positions over time in the absence of changes to the standards of value this system rests on. In *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte (1943) famously described how bowling performances could elevate or downgrade the standing of Norton Street gang members in *Street Corner Society.* Scholars of scientific and artistic fields likewise document how status moves happen as individuals go through operations of evaluation

that update public perceptions of their value and enhance or lower their position in a status system (Crane 1976; Zuckerman 1992; English 2005; Menger 2014). In these diverse cases, individual status mobility hinges on the passing—or failing—of a test or trial enforcing a field's given standards of worth.

To the extent that status hierarchies rest on shared cultural beliefs about the comparative ranking in esteem among categories of people or things, fluidity within a hierarchy can further occur through the external change of status beliefs within a community, field, or society.[6] One prominent example of such *external fluidity* is the transformation of race-based status beliefs in the United States over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Jacobson 1999; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; see also Telles and Sue 2009; Davenport 2020). Scholars have documented how the fluidity of racial classifications in that period helped Italian immigrants move from racialized pariah status in the nineteenth century to that of White Americans in good standing in the twentieth. They further show how the expansion of American and White identities—which resulted in the inclusion of European immigrants—paved the way for the now-durable reality that race in the United States is chiefly about the Black-White divide (Jacobson 1999).[7]

We define the extent of fluidity within a status system—a system-level property—as the aggregation of internal mobility and externally driven reshuffling, as observed at the individual level. Such fluidity matters, first, because the churn of a status system also defines its rigidity. In the intergenerational and life-course mobility literatures, which focus on outcomes such as occupational standing, income, or educational attainment, researchers have long cared about describing the extent of fluidity in a system (Blau and Duncan 1967; Breen and Jonsson 2007; Torche 2014; Song et al. 2020). A lack of mobility exemplifies a rigid system in which actors get "locked in" to their positions, which many view as both unjust and undemocratic. This same logic applies to status outcomes, such as honor, deference, or attention. We know that actors aspire to move up the ladder and fear falling in rank with regard to their status (Ridgeway 2019), but it is valuable to develop an understanding of the extent of these movements up or down across status systems—or, even more precisely, to observe whether certain kinds of status trajectories (such as the "sleeping beauty" pathway) are more common in some systems than in others (Lynn and Espy 2021).

The greater or lesser rigidity of status hierarchies further matters because it is a direct force shaping inequality in the resources individuals derive from the positions they occupy in status systems. The more rigidity in a hierarchy, first, the less diverse the actors who benefit from the rewards accruing to its more desirable positions. To put it in Thomas DiPrete and Gregory Eirich's (2006) terms, high-status actors in a rigid hierarchy enjoy a form of "cumulative exposure" to the privileges of their positions, so that over time their levels of rewards pull away from those of lower-status individuals. This is not the case in fluid hierarchies characterized by high status mobility, such as celebrity systems in which everyone might be famous for fifteen minutes (Warhol 1967)—although we know that actual celebrity systems are more rigid than this (van de Rijt et al. 2013).

Furthermore, the greater churn of status hi-

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6. The reshuffling of a status system through external change in status beliefs may or may not be accompanied by changes to other characteristics of the system—to its verticality or clarity, for example. Such changes are distinct from external fluidity as we define it here.

7. As an implication, attending to the fluidity or rigidity of status hierarchies can help us understand the nature of the valuation schemas underlying status systems. While we know that status hierarchies often arise from socially constructed beliefs about the relative worth of diverse categories of people or things, a constructionist explanation is only compelling if social construction can be disentangled from objective constraints. Fluidity over time and space is often the only way to convincingly adjudicate between the two: if an object or person is valued highly in one period but not in another even though their intrinsic qualities remain constant, we are forced to confront how society constructed value in each period; if, however, we can find no variation in how an object or person is valued over time, we cannot rule out the explanation that their value is tied to their intrinsic qualities.

erarchies can undermine the power of status distinctions to shape the rewards individuals in these hierarchies derive from their status positions (Accominotti, forthcoming). If status is a stable thing, if actors at the top of status systems have it while others do not, then it makes sense that third parties would reward actors in status hierarchies based on their status positions. But if status comes and goes, if who has it depends on the standards of worth in place at any given time—if, in other words, status hierarchies are more fluid—then they are unlikely to be powerful drivers of how third parties behave toward those in these hierarchies. Third-party behavior may still generate inequality between the inhabitants of status systems. Yet this inequality is less likely to have its roots in status distinctions.

CONCLUSION

Many studies justify their value by arguing that they are "opening up" black boxes that more general explanations have glossed over. This mode of research often examines causal relationships previously taken for granted, identifying the specific, microlevel mechanisms that produce and reproduce the processes of interest. This method of theoretical advancement seems typical and normal.

In many ways, status research has reversed this common approach. Previous work in this area has produced extensive insight into the intricate microlevel mechanisms that produce status differences and determine status rewards. Here, because of years of experimental work, the black box—the inner workings of status processes—holds few mysteries. More mysterious in this case are the factors external to these black boxes—the contexts, the structures, the definitions of values—that shape the activities that go on within them. This article attempted to draw attention to some of these factors outside of the black box and to show how they are consequential. Specifically, we focused on the architectural characteristics of status hierarchies in which microlevel status activities take place and we proposed that these characteristics determine the degree of inequality in material rewards generated by status processes. This approach directly answers calls to "look across levels of analysis from the

individual and interpersonal to the organizational to the macro-structural and cultural to discover how status processes create and sustain patterns of resource inequality" (Ridgeway 2014, 1).

Studying status hierarchies in their own right lays the groundwork for new lines of investigation that both complement and build on traditional status research. One obvious avenue of potential research is to more systematically examine the associations between the dimensions of status hierarchies we highlighted (verticality versus horizontality, clarity versus blurriness, rigidity versus fluidity) and the outcome inequalities emerging from status processes. Isolating particular characteristics of status hierarchies experimentally, for instance, could help specify whether and to what degree these characteristics matter. It would also be valuable to examine how specific combinations of these characteristics (for example, a hierarchy that is more vertical, clear, and rigid as opposed to one that is more horizontal, blurry, and fluid) exacerbate or mitigate inequality. More generally, it would be beneficial to identify additional characteristics of status hierarchies that might affect the production of inequality.

The focus on hierarchies that we argue for here also underlines the usefulness of more concerted analysis of the values that undergird and justify status hierarchies. Thinking in terms of hierarchies encourages questions such as: How clearly are the values of a status system defined? How stable are these values over time? How general or specific are the status-defining values of a particular group? Although these questions may be especially salient for hierarchies circumscribed by specialized content, they also have implications for the generalized beliefs that define broad status hierarchies based on gender, race, ethnicity, or social class. As Ridgeway (2014, 2) writes, "status, in contrast to resources and power, is based primarily in cultural beliefs rather than directly on material arrangements." If this is the case, then understanding the properties of status hierarchies requires an examination of the forms taken by these cultural value beliefs. For example, to understand how occupations are vertically differentiated, we need to under-

stand the value beliefs that imbue occupations with greater or lesser social standing (Lynn and Ellerbach 2017). The point is that a focus on the characteristics of status hierarchies invites us to further interrogate the characteristics of the valuation systems on which these hierarchies often rest.

Finally, conceptualizing status hierarchies as units of analysis also pushes us to consider the various ways in which multiple hierarchies interact and influence each other—and, by doing so, shape the outcomes of actors within them. We currently know little about the effects of cross-cutting, overlapping, or nested status systems. The overall status of an actor—and the advantages or disadvantages that accrue from it—is often determined by a complex array of status positions. Thinking about this complexity in terms of status hierarchies and their characteristics will help us better understand the causes and consequences of the status processes that limit or enhance our life chances and color the experience of our everyday lives.

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Inequality and the Status Window: Inequality, Conflict, and the Salience of Status Differences in Conflicts over Resources

KEVIN T. LEICHT

The study of the relationship between social status and inequality has a distinguished history. Inequality scholars outside this tradition have paid more attention to social status in response to a set of seemingly persistent paradoxes that defy easy explanation. I add to the tradition by developing the concept of status windows and status windows overlap to partially account for differences in the relationship between social status and inequality processes in low- and high-inequality environments. These concepts are tied to the functioning of social status in creating and maintaining inequality and to the characteristics of social networks that develop in (especially) high-inequality environments. I examine how the concepts of status windows and status window overlap can help explain some paradoxes in responses to heightened social inequality and recommend that research focus on understandings of status windows and status windows overlap to understand why social inequality continues unabated in some places.

Social status is fundamental to understanding social inequality and our responses to it (see Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014; Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue). For many structurally oriented inequality scholars, the role of social status in understanding social inequality and its consequences has remained in the background or has focused on occupational status (see, for example, Sakamoto 2020). However, recent substantive developments around the globe and in the United States have sparked a renewed interest in status as a driver of persistent social inequality and as a mechanism for understanding why collective responses to inequality seem inadequate or counterproductive (see Hacker and Pearson 2010; Cramer 2016; Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018; Kelly 2019).

What are some examples of these inadequate, counterproductive tendencies? Prior scholarship shows that our understandings of social inequality vary widely depending on whether we live in a high- or low-inequality environment and that those living in high-

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inequality environments such as the United States dramatically underestimate national levels of social inequality (see Niehues 2014). Scholars from a variety of perspectives have pointed to the inability of people to agree on collective solutions to high or rising inequality even though people generally think inequality is too high (see Kelly 2019). Some scholars point to lack of trust in solutions and a general decline in trust that seems to accompany high and rising inequality. Others point to motivated reasoning and other social psychological mechanisms that reframe current conditions as just or blame those who are less affluent (see Brooks and Harter 2021; Trump 2020). Scholars also have noted the development of winner-take-all labor markets and the near exclusive focus on the attainment of high-status, but demographically trivial, social positions such as Ivy League acceptances, Supreme Court appointments, Nobel Prizes, Fortune 500 CEO positions, outsized business success, and so on (see Frank and Cook 1995).

This analysis takes the basic insights from long-standing work on social status, social networks, and inequality and examines the implications of these insights for places with relatively more and less economic inequality. After presenting evidence concerning the ability to perceive social inequality in high- and low-inequality environments in Norway and the United States, I introduce the concepts of *status windows* and *status windows overlap* as mechanisms for linking existing understandings of status with the material inequalities produced in different inequality contexts. *Status windows* are that portion of the social inequality environment directly salient and viewable to any given actor in the system. *Status windows overlap* refers to the overlapping experiences and understandings of a given actor in the social inequality landscape relative to their immediate neighbors. After introducing these concepts, I discuss how these concepts are tied to prior research on social status, social networks and social inequality and then discuss how status windows and status windows overlap might help to explain three paradoxes in high-inequality environments: the inability to find consensus on mechanisms to lower inequality even though most people in the United States

believe that inequality is too high; the focus and obsession on high status, but demographically trivial positions in public cultural discourse; and the focus on business gurus and the worship of extremely successful entrepreneurs without an accompanying understanding of the contexts for their success.

INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STATUS: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

A *low-inequality environment* is an economic and political system that produces relatively little economic inequality by global standards. Workers tend to have an extensive set of job rights and protections, minimum wages, publicly provided fringe benefits, and a social safety net including family support policies. A good example is Norway. A *high-inequality environment* tends to rely on markets to deliver income and earnings to the population, interferes relatively little in that distribution, has a meager social safety net and few if any guaranteed job rights for workers (see Grusky and MacLean 2016). The United States is a typical example of a high-inequality environment. Much of the research on social status and social inequality (like research on social inequality overall) focuses on high-inequality environments such as the United States and expresses some concern about the social and cultural fragmentation that high inequality produces (Grusky and MacLean 2016; Stephens, Markus, and Phillips 2014; Brooks and Harter 2021; DiMaggio and Garip 2012; Kossinets and Watts 2009).

One would think that inequality perceptions would be especially sensitive and perhaps more accurate in the high-inequality relative to the low-inequality environment. Exactly the opposite is true, however. In figure 1, respondents to the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) were asked to provide estimates of the relative size of seven income classes, lowest to highest (Niehues 2014).

In the comparison between Norway respondents and those from the United States, the Norway respondents are much more accurate in estimating the relative size of different economic classes in their country. American respondents are way off. They overestimate the size of the middle classes and underestimate the size of the lowest class by a considerable

Figure 1. Perceptions of Inequality in High- and Low-Inequality Environments
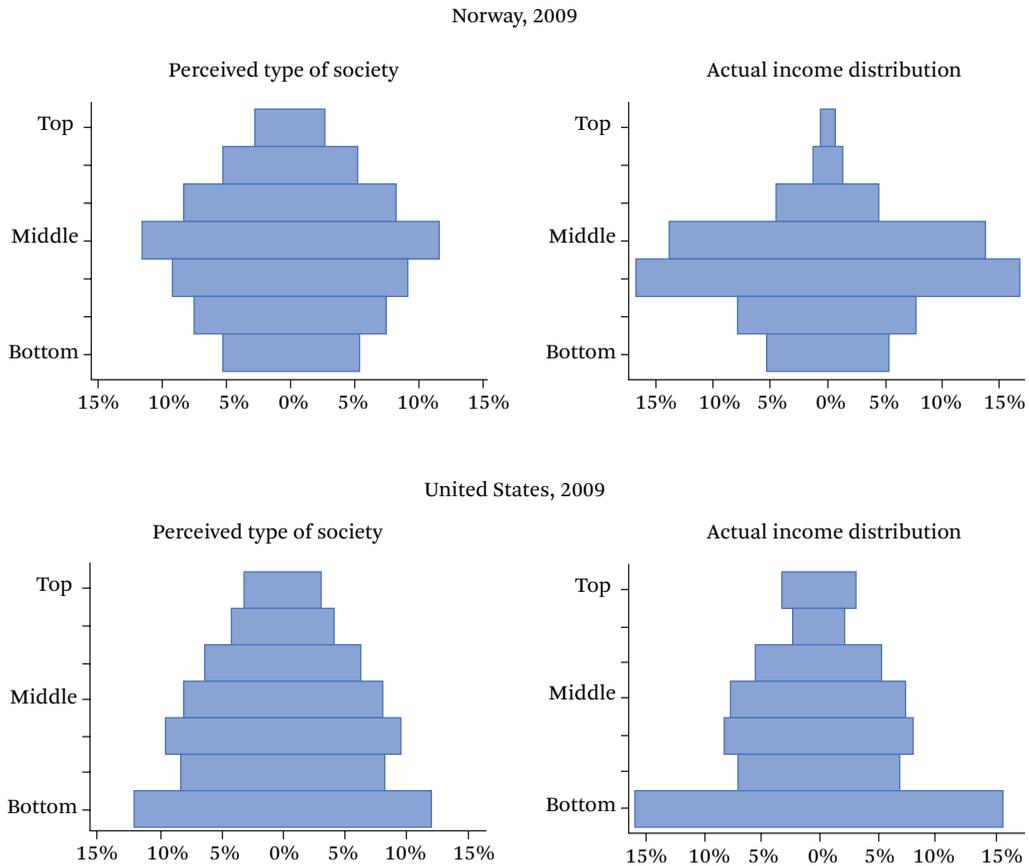
Source: EU-SILC n.d.; ISSP 2009; PSID 2022; author's tabulation based on Niehues 2014.
*Note:* Population shares in seven income classes from Niehues 2014.

margin. Of the ISSP respondent nations, the U.S. relationship between perception and reality is the most askew and in the wrong direction: Americans think there is quite a bit less inequality than there actually is.

This misperception has implications. Figure 2 examines the relationship between subjective Gini coefficients for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries and support for the observation that "income differences are too large."

As the highlighted areas show, the Norway respondents' subjective Gini's are fairly close to the actual income inequality Gini for the country. American respondents are (as figure 1 suggests) far off. Not surprisingly, nations whose citizens believe that income inequality is high believe that income differences are too large. In

the United States, however, income inequality is not perceived (in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary) therefore support for the idea that income differences are too large is relatively scant (see Norton and Ariely 2011). Differences of opinion about whether inequality in the United States is too high are legitimate, but it is hard to have a productive discussion about the issues if we do not even know the extent of the inequality. Our evidence leaves us with a paradox: income inequality is accurately perceived where it is relatively low and very poorly perceived where it is high.

Thus in high-inequality environments such as the United States, the perception of inequality is far from the reality. In addition, "invisible inequality" is considerable (see Nishi et al. 2015; Brooks and Harter 2021; Kraus and Stephens

**Figure 2.** Perceptions of Inequality and Preferences for Redistribution
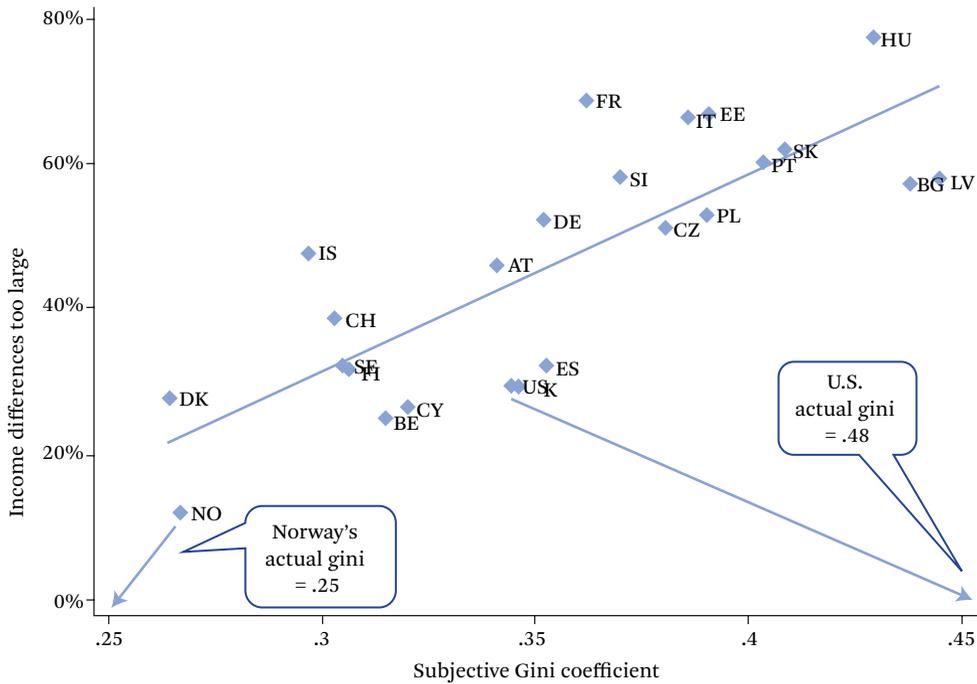
Source: Author's tabulation based on Niehues 2014; ISSP 2009.

2012). Wealth inequality is a good example. The understanding of what constitutes wealth and how unequally it is distributed is hard to detect. In the United States, the bottom half of those in the wealth distribution own in effect nothing (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2019). The only group whose wealth has grown in real dollars since 1990 are those in the top 10 percent, and much of that growth is concentrated in the top 1 percent. This unperceived wealth inequality extends to racial and ethnic groups. The median net worth of African American families is scarcely 10 percent of white, non-Hispanic families and that ratio has not moved for decades (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2019; Shapiro 2017). When asked how unequal the distribution of wealth is in the United States, American respondents provide answers that suggest that actual wealth inequality at home is closer to Sweden's actual wealth inequality and then express preferences for still more equality (see Norton and Ariely 2011).

Misperceptions of how inequality has grown and its relationship to different status groups are also serious. This complicates common understandings of the relationship between social status and material inequalities still further. For example, most of the new inequality created in the United States since 1980 has occurred within racial and gender categories and not between them (see Leicht 2008, 2016; see also figures 3 and 4).

In addition, perceptions of status groups in relation to understanding American poverty are off as well. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate this point. Figure 5 presents the number of people in poverty from 1970 to 2014 by race-ethnicity. Two things are apparent but not part of popular discourse, even though social scientists may be aware of these features. First, most of America's poor are white. This has been true for quite some time, but it is an enduring fact that is discordant with our perceptions of status characteristics and their relationship to continuous measures of inequality. Second, the Great Recession of 2008–2009 was clearly a disaster for all people, regardless of race-ethnicity. Uniformly more citizens ended up with incomes below the poverty line in 2014 relative to 2000.

Figure 3. Income Inequality
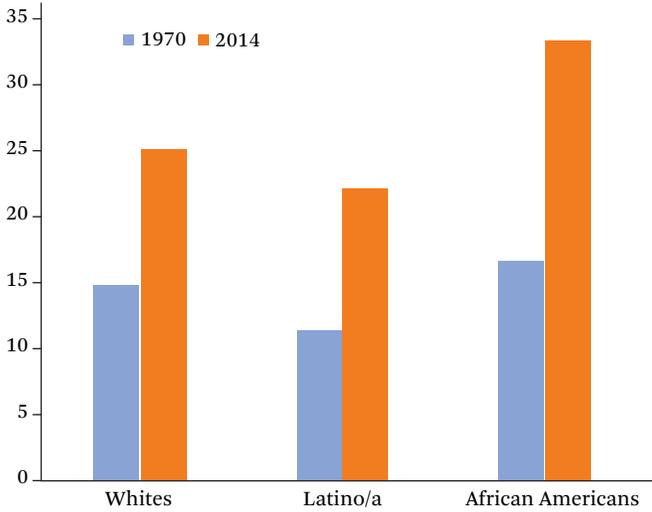
Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table H-1.
Note: Figures are the ratios of mean household income in the top 5 percent and lowest 20 percent by race-ethnicity.

Figure 4. Gini Indicies for Households
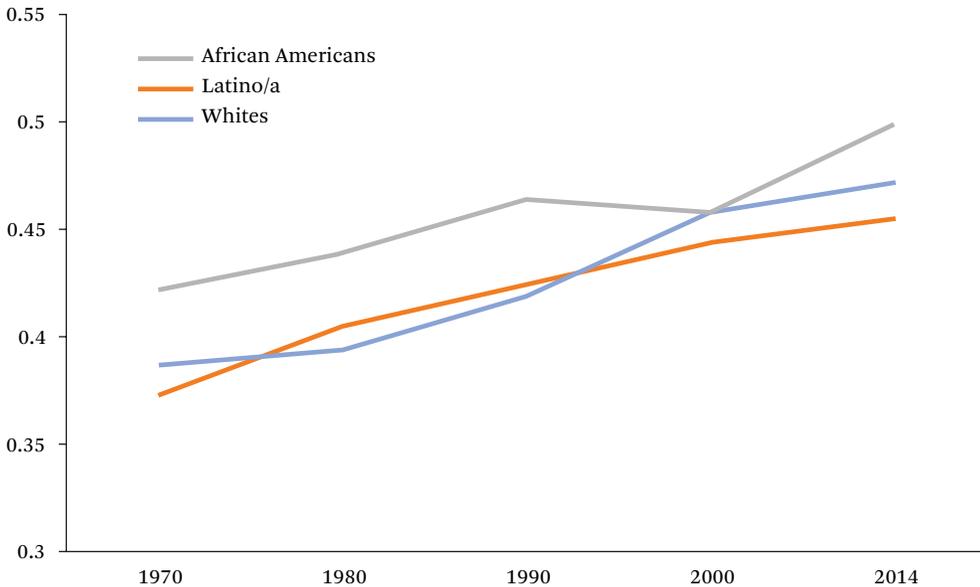
Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d. [*GINIHARF*].

But in terms of absolute numbers, almost as many whites fell into poverty as African Americans and Hispanics already were: 9,444,000 whites versus 10,755,000 African Americans and 13,104,000 Hispanics.

All of this information has several implications for understanding the relationship between social status and continuous measures of inequality. First, our perceptions of inequality and its severity grows poorer as inequality

Figure 5. Persons in Poverty
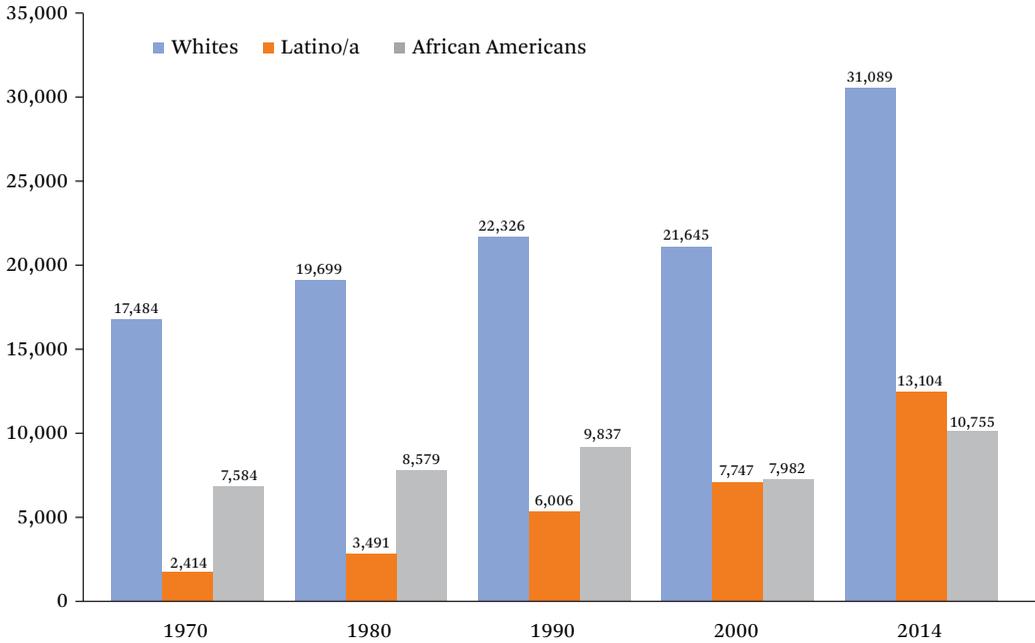
Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table 3.

Figure 6. Ratio of Whites in Poverty to African Americans and Latinos
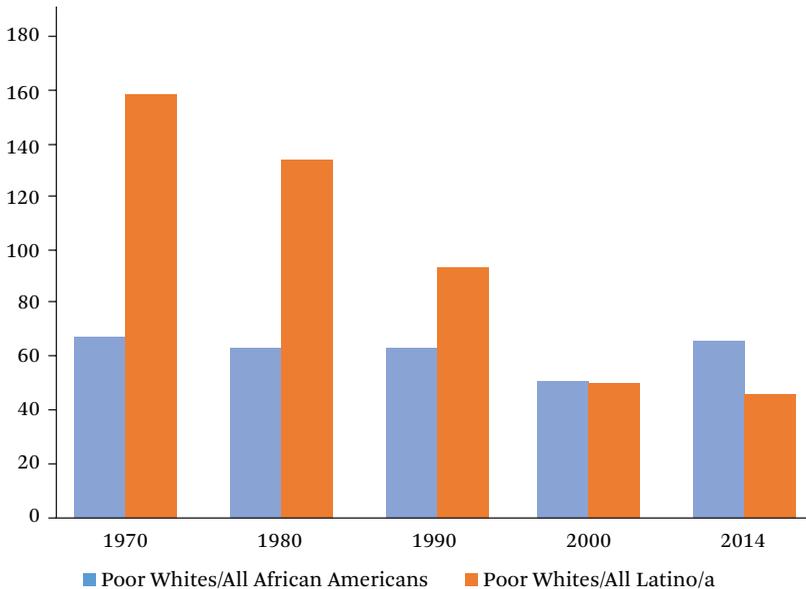
Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table 3.
Note: At one hundred, there is one poor white person for every African American or Latino, regardless of economic status.

grows. Second, if some of this inequality is hidden (for example, via wealth), our perceptions grow poorer still. Third, high and rising inequality produces growing ambiguities between perception of discrete status characteristics (such as race and gender) and continuous measures of inequality.

Why are Americans' perceptions of inequality so far off? In the following section, I introduce the concepts of status windows and status windows overlap as one possible explanation.

WHY THE DISCONNECT? THE CONCEPTS OF STATUS WINDOWS AND STATUS OVERLAP

This article develops the concept of *status windows* as a way to understand some of the paradoxes in the relationship between social status and social inequality as measured on continuous dimensions such as income and wealth (see Cramer 2016; Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018; Koenig 2022, this issue; Mendelberg 2022, this issue). Our ability to understand the world around us depends on our perceptions and connections to others making perceptions. From the standpoint of understanding social inequality, I refer to our ability to understand the world of social inequality as a *status window* (see figure 7).

A status window is the portion of the social inequality environment directly salient and viewable to any given ego or individual in the system. Within a person's status window are a series of status evaluations of worthiness and unworthiness that produce the status evaluations at the root of many status distinctions. The status window is the portion of the social inequality system we see and understand in the concrete. Its "width" is determined by cognitive limitations and shortcuts we resort to as part of our individual life-worlds (the top of the triangle in figure 7). But our overall understanding of the social inequality system we live in is determined by the interaction between the window width and the extent of continuous-dimension social inequality in the overall society or cultural group (wealth or income, for example).

Because status windows are affected by cognitive and time-constraint limitations (most people do not have unlimited brainpower and time to devote to understanding the world around them) a uniformly sized status window will create a broader understanding of a low-inequality environment than a high-inequality environment. In addition, the status windows in a low-inequality environment will have another feature I refer to as *status windows overlap*—the overlapping experiences and understandings of a given individual's perceptions of the social inequality system and that of their neighbors. This creates a set of direct and indirect connections in the low-inequality environment that look like the graph in figure 8.

In a low-inequality environment, the status window covers a relatively broad portion of the distribution of continuous-dimension inequalities for four reasons. First, the portion of the inequality system any person has direct contact with is relatively larger than in the high-inequality environment (more on that below). Second, the status windows of adjacent others overlap, tying adjacent others' status windows to your own. Third, the network connections of direct and indirect ties expand the understanding of inequality still further. Fourth, the social distance between any location in the distribution and any other is relatively short. In such an environment, one can imagine what others' lives are like, might at least indirectly know them and, even if that is not true, one could easily find out.

Figure 7. The "Status Window"

Status Window

The continuum of inequality—income, wealth, Prestige, SES, et cetera

Self/Ego
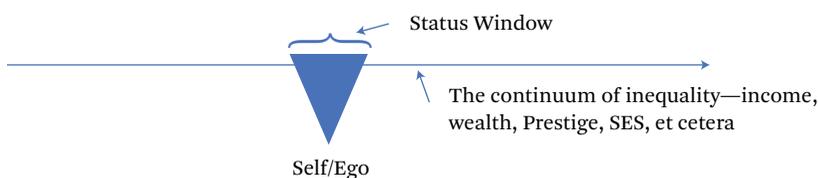
Source: Author's tabulation.

Figure 8. Status Windows in a Low Inequality Environment
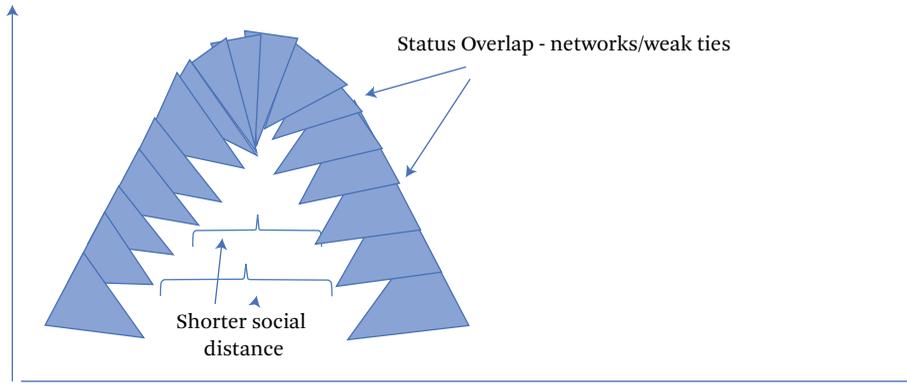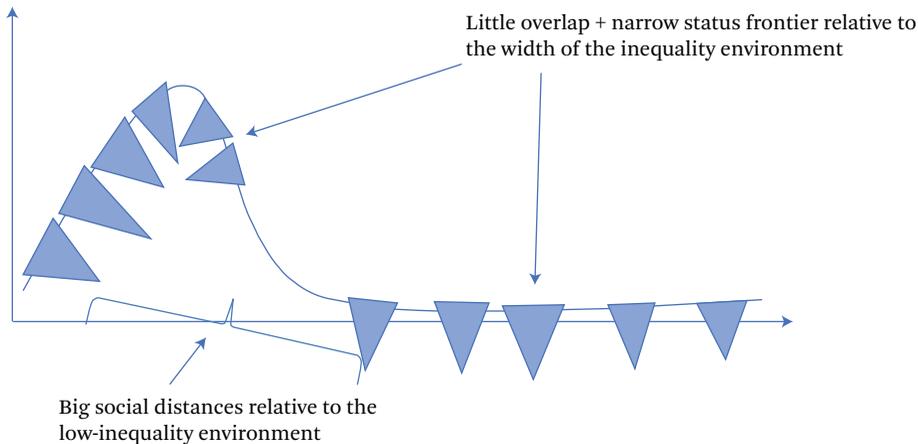

Source: Author's tabulation.

But this is not the case in a high-inequality environment like the United States. In a high-inequality environment (figure 9), the same-sized status window covers a much smaller portion of any continuous-dimension of inequality, the status windows of individuals do not overlap or overlap very little, and the social distance between any given person in the distribution and any other is wide relative to their counterparts in low-inequality environments. Many people have no extensive status window overlap and no connections to people in other parts of the (vast) inequality system. In this case, it is not completely surprising that the overall understanding of the social inequality system, based on continuous dimensions such as wealth or income, may be lacking. Each person has relatively few interactions with others who are not right next to them. Each person also has few, if any connections to far off parts of the system, even via indirect ties and status overlaps. The knowledge a person could glean from their immediate environment would be much more limited and the understanding of those distant almost nonexistent. In a system like this, it is easy to see how respondents in the United States might dramatically underestimate the amount of income and wealth inequality in their midst and misperceive the relationship between prominent status characteristics and that inequality.

The concept of status windows and status overlap differs somewhat from Lauren Valentino's discussion of status lenses (2022). Sta-

tus lenses vary on the basis of the relationship of a given actor to powerful actors versus powerless or peripheral actors. In the concepts of status windows and status window overlap, people's views indeed vary on the basis of where they are located. In that sense, the two concepts overlap. However, I argue that status windows are more a function of inherent cognitive limitations of social understanding, that their implications depend on how much social inequality there is to comprehend, the connection one has with neighbors, and the connection those neighbors have with the wider social system. Nonetheless, it is true that the product of status windows and status windows overlap is a status lens, that is, a specific understanding of the social inequality system that may have much in common with others (in a low-inequality environment) or an understanding that has relatively little in common with others (in a high-inequality environment).

SOCIAL STATUS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN RELATION TO STATUS WINDOWS AND OVERLAP

In this article, status windows and status windows overlap are tied to social status processes and social networks as they function in different inequality environments. Evidence is considerable that status is an important component of how social inequality systems work. Status is a multidimensional process that creates inequality on the basis of esteem, honor,

Figure 9. Status Windows in a High-Inequality Environment

Little overlap + narrow status frontier relative to the width of the inequality environment

Big social distances relative to the low-inequality environment

Source: Author's tabulation.

and respect accorded to individuals and social groups. People share widely held status beliefs about worthiness, and that U.S. society and culture is pregnant with status beliefs about gender, race, occupations, and class categories that represent how "most people" think (see Correll and Ridgeway 2006). These expectations about self and others in relation to groups are often implicit, unconscious, and self-fulfilling. Regardless of debates about how consensual the entire status process is, actors defer to these beliefs if they think deference will produce optimal group results (see Schwalbe and Shay 2014). Preferences and expectations are shaped by *status characteristics* themselves (such as the assumed relationships between gender, race, and competence), *behavioral interchange patterns* (assertiveness or passiveness in the course of interaction itself, shaped by expectation states), and the *social rewards* people already have or expect to receive from the group. Additional and extensive evidence indicates that expectations affect performance as a self-fulfilling prophesy (Lovaglia, Lucas, and Thye 1998; Inzlicht and Schmader 2012; Schmader and Hall 2014). Status becomes what "most people know" through goal-oriented encounters with different groups in daily experience. If wealth or control over resources are associated with status characteristics, then that social difference becomes salient and is tied to competence and esteem.

These interpersonal interactions, repeated over months, days, and years, produce status biases (different views of who is competent and worthy, with built-in biases toward high-status people with generalized, high-status traits) that lead to a communal sorting process that steer people into privileged and less privileged spaces. These institutionalized interaction patterns also produce a preference for high-status homophily, erect barriers to entry for lower-status actors and compel low-status actors to respond to and associate with high-status actors in order to improve their social standing (see Destin et al. 2022). High-status actors also appeal to widely held, taken-for-granted status beliefs in responding to status challenges, instigating backlash and push-back to keep lower-status challengers in their place (see Anderson, Ames, and Gosling 2008).

In understanding different status processes in high- and low-inequality environments, another important feature of prior research on social status is the *aggregation assumption* (see Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). In this assumption, all the status characteristics of an actor are combined, weighted, and applied to specific situations where multiple status characteristics are available and salient. This assumption is especially important for understanding reactions to and understandings of social inequality in high-inequality environments because (as shown above) there are inconsis-

tencies in the United States between our understandings of some taken-for-granted status characteristics (especially gender and race) and continuous, high and rising, measures of material inequality.

The net result of the functioning of status processes is a self-reinforcing, culturally autonomous system for reproducing social inequality. (see also Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue, figure 1). As interpersonal evaluations, rankings, and reward perceptions are repeated, and as these evaluations overlap with perceptions of competence, the overall perceptual frame "aggregates up" and becomes societal, institutionalized, and "taken for granted" (see also Accominotti, Lynn, and Sauder 2022, this issue). The burden of proof now lies with those who wish to disrupt a taken-for-granted status hierarchy rather than with those conforming to it. The institutionalized, taken-for-granted evaluation is then passed back downward in a self-reinforcing fashion, making interpersonal status evaluations in small groups taken even more for granted and implied as the process moves forward.

Evidence is also considerable that social status is reinforced by social networks and social network segregation. Like may breed like (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), but it is increasingly clear that who we get to share our lives with is driven by more than our homophily preferences. High-inequality environments also produce what network researchers refer to as "induced homophily" (see Dimaggio and Garip 2012; Tóth et al. 2021; Kossinets and Watts 2009). Induced homophily is created by the structured world we live in: for example, occupations and jobs have only certain types of incumbents, neighborhoods are strongly segregated by income and race, and educational institutions reward the actions and orientations of elites and the upper middle classes at the expense of the actions and orientations of first-generation students and the working class (see Stephens, Markus, and Phillips 2014). These structures affect the type of people we are exposed to and interact with apart from our preferences. By implication, these structured environments also exclude a myriad of others who are viewed as less worthy, less qualified, or less networked. As Miller McPherson, Lynn

Smith-Lovin, and James Cook suggest (2001), geographic closeness, families, and organizations all create situations where homophilous relations form.

As Nicole Stephens, Hazel Markus, and Taylor Phillips suggest (2014), social class and other forms of segregation produce differences in material and social conditions that promote different ways of conceiving the self and relating to others. For example, in lower social class environments, the self is assumed to be interdependent with others (Stephens et al. 2009; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007). In contrast, the environments of higher social class people promote independence, personal freedom, and choice. The self is assumed to be independent and it is acceptable to stand out and exercise influence over others in social interactions. High-status individuals live in environments with elevated material resources and social rank that leave them free to pursue goals and interests that are tied to their preferences (see also Johnson and Krueger 2005; Lachman and Weaver 1998).

The effects of this persistent social segregation are profound and play themselves out in the ways people in different social locations (social classes in particular) see the world. Stephens, Markus, and Phillips (2014) talk about the gateway institutions of family, schools and workplaces where the expectations of independent, self-seeking, and self-fulfilling behavior is fully consistent with upper-middle-class and elite professional life, but incompatible (or less compatible) with working-class life. Stephens and colleagues (2019) explain the difficulties that first-generation college students have adjusting to the interaction patterns and expectations of self in college environments (see also Stephens et al. 2012). Even neighborhoods and segregated places produce distinctive forms of social network interaction (social capital), cultural practices (or habitus), and living environments that advantage and disadvantage their residents in their interactions with the outside world (Israel and Frankel 2018; see also Wilson 1987; Anderson 1999).

How do social networks and social status processes play out to create status windows for individuals? The ability of any given status window to provide insights into the breadth of a

social inequality system depends on two things. The first is the actual material inequality. Societies with high-inequality and fixed-width status windows provide relatively limited insights into what life is like in different parts of the social system (United States). Comparatively, societies with low-inequality and fixed-width status windows provide relatively greater insights into what life is like in different parts of the social system (Norway).

Second, segregated social networks and status homophily preferences interact with the level of inequality to produce different implications in high- and low-inequality environments. Highly segregated social networks and strong homophily preferences in high-inequality environments produce relatively little status windows overlap between individuals in different parts of any inequality system (see figure 9). One's networks tend to be homogeneous, relatively limited in variation, and the repetitions of social interactions within these worlds produce distinctive orientations toward social life that can vary dramatically and seriously disadvantage those who are not part of a select elite (see Stephens, Markus, and Phillips 2014). In low-inequality environments, people may still have homophily preferences, but relatively lower levels of economic segregation will increase the status windows overlap within the system. This heightened overlap increases the chances that "somebody knows somebody who knows somebody" who is in a different economic and status location.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS: HIGH INEQUALITY LEADS TO ENHANCED STATUS FOCUS, NOT LESS

Some research suggests that people in high-inequality environments misperceive the inequality around them. Other studies, however, indicate that heightened inequality affects our mental functioning in adverse ways that make it less likely that we will seek collective remedies.

First, people in high-inequality environments have poorer quality social relationships (see Wilkinson and Pickett 2017). Higher inequality also is associated with higher levels of narcissism and self-enhancing behaviors. Higher-status people, in particular, come to see their positions as deserved (Lowrey, Knowles, and Unzueta 2007); high-status people are also less generous and people in high-inequality countries express less compassion overall (Cote, House, and Willer 2015). These are part of a larger motivated reasoning response to high inequality some researchers claim is present in places that emphasize meritocracy (see Roex, Huijts, and Sieben 2019; Brooks and Harter 2021).

Second, high-inequality environments produce structural and social segregation that leads to enhanced identity signaling and stronger in-group identification (Piff, Krause, and Keltner 2018). The rise in social and structural segregation that accompanies high-inequality increases in-group identification still further and lessens contact with other, less-favored groups (Domhoff 1998; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Cikara and Van Bavel 2014; Massey and Denton 1995). The relative lack of sustained social contact further increases social stereotyping (Piff, Krause, and Keltner 2018).

Third, heightened inequality produces hypervigilance about social status and more extreme responses in the face of challenges (Butterick and Oishi 2016; Schmader, Dennehy, and Baron 2022; Rodríguez-Bailón et al. 2020). Increased status anxiety breeds mistrust and increased preferences for group-based inequality and status markers (Morrison, Fast, and Ybarra 2009). Hypervigilance about status also reduces trust in major social institutions and increases actor susceptibility to hate-group messages on social media (Hawdin, Bernatzky, and Costello 2019).

Fourth, as Heather E. Bullock, Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams (2001) show, media portrayals rarely include the poor and, if they do, portray them as deviant or deficient (see also Iyengar 1990; Gilens 1996). Overall, as Susan Fiske (2011) notes, high-inequality environments appear as places where people are not bound by a common collective task, inviting more open expressions of negative emotions, stereotyping, and open hostility.

Finally, high-inequality environments increasingly produce winner-take-all competitions for resources (see Frank and Cook 1995, 2013). Such markets are products of globaliza-

tion and the technological revolution of the past forty years. Winner-take-all markets take competitions between numerous actors and winnow them mercilessly down to a small number who will garner most of the status and rewards the market has to offer. They affect the products available to the average consumer (for example, the relative dominance of the Windows operating system for PCs relative to Linux, or of the iPhone relative to other smart phones) and increase barriers to entry for new competitors. Evidence is widespread that winner-take-all markets stifle innovation and distorted incentives as well (Fishbacher and Thoni 2008).

Winner-take-all labor markets take a small number of the entrants to relatively high-status jobs and disproportionately reward them, leaving everyone else with relatively little or in a state of complete exclusion. Contests for these demographically trivial, high-prestige positions becomes a cultural and media obsession (Schor 1996, 1998; Halpern 2007; Rubens 2009). Like the research suggesting that heightened inequality leads to increased status vigilance, defensiveness, and anxiety, winner-take-all labor markets increase the stakes and opportunity costs associated with status competitions (Fishbacher and Thoni 2008).

In summary, heightened inequality is associated with a series of changes in the functioning of markets that increase the stakes of economic competition. It also increases the chances that status evaluations will be invoked, increase the vigilance attached to status and status defense, and reduce commitments to the collective institutions needed to moderate social inequality.

SOCIAL STATUS, STATUS WINDOWS, AND INEQUALITY PARADOXES: THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

In the rest of this analysis, I briefly explore three apparent paradoxes and offer an explanation based on the concepts of status windows and status overlap.

Why American Voters Don't Champion Economic Redistribution

I start with one of the long-standing paradoxes of high-inequality environments, especially the United States. Social scientists and observers for at least the past hundred years have focused on voters and their preferences for economic redistribution (for classic treatments, see Downs 1956). Generally, low-status economically marginalized people are expected to vote for parties of the Left that favor economic redistribution and extensive social safety nets. Relatively high-status, less economically marginalized people are expected to reject economic distribution and to seek to preserve the status quo. The economic redistribution hypothesis in political science, a long-standing postwar theoretical staple, centered on this basic expectation (see Milanovic 2010). In the middle of the 1970s (see Schumpeter 2003; Bell 1976), predictions were even made that capitalist and state socialist societies would converge toward a common state-centered social democratic economy in response to economic crises and citizen preferences (see O'Connor 1973).

Recurrent analyses, though, suggest that citizen preferences did not run in the direction of more economic redistribution (Milanovic 2010; Kelly 2019). Anthropologists, most notably James Scott (1977), were skeptical from the start. They pointed out that people near the bottom of many social systems are actually quite conservative and for good reason, specifically, the lack of economic slack for experimentation. Second, this conservatism increases the more upward mobility is blocked. Rather than the belief that "I could be a millionaire someday, therefore don't treat millionaires badly," the prevailing ethic revolves around preserving what one has in the here and now. More contemporary analysts talk about threats to status, which (as discussed) are enhanced in high-inequality environments like the United States (Cramer 2016; Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018; Kelly 2019). Cultural and social fragmentation combine with the higher stakes of high inequality to increase status vigilance, the relative importance of status characteristics, and levels of mistrust and stereotyping. Redistribution might even be preferred, but the level of mistrust that the "wrong people will benefit," that unfit and undeserving individuals are already "jumping the line," and that actors personally will be on the hook to pay for these un-

deserving beneficiaries leads to less support for redistribution in the United States than one would think should be there. As figure 9 suggests with the gaps between status windows and big social distance margins, structural connections that would increase empathy and civic-mindedness are missing (see Kelly 2019).

The analysis presented here provides one explanation for why this outcome occurs and progressive political groups end up disappointed. Widening inequality, and the structural and cultural segregation it produces, narrows actors' status windows and status window overlap. The high-stakes competitions that accompany winner-take-all markets under extreme inequality heighten status vigilance, lower empathy, increase self-regard and status enhancing beliefs, and increase the stereotyping and dehumanization of lower-status groups that are viewed as status threats to the established order. The accompanying lack of trust in government efforts at redistribution result from the fear that the "wrong people" will benefit, so nothing (or next to nothing) is done. Under this scenario, the entire array of status processes that prior research discusses are triggered and status matters more in high-inequality environments relative to low-inequality environments. The problem is exacerbated further, in the American context, by the dubious relationship of the U.S. Democratic Party with capitalism and economic redistribution (see Phillips 1992) as the party sends dubious signals about whether it represents working people or a separate and divided elite not represented by the Republicans (see Manza and Brooks 1999).

Why We Focus on Demographic Representation in Demographically Trivial Jobs

Scarcely a week goes by without a new discussion of why there are not more African American Fortune 500 CEOs, Supreme Court justices, professors with tenure at prestigious universities, movie stars in feature films, hedge fund managers, Silicon Valley multimillionaires, NFL football coaches, and so on. Yet a social scientist cannot help but notice that these discussions have become more insistent and pervasive as overall income and wealth inequality

has worsened (see Frank and Cook 1995). Culturally we may be looking for milestones that suggest that certain types of gender and racial inequality are lessening, and the new hires in these highly visible and glamorous positions might be just that.

Two reasons seem to explain this focus, one cultural and the other aspirational. Culturally, the United States worships celebrity and is obsessed with the lives and lifestyles of the rich and famous (Rubens 2009; Schor 1996, 1998; Halpern 2007). Debate is considerable about how healthy this obsession is, but its existence is not in dispute. From the standpoint of understanding social inequality and its evolution, the cultural obsession with celebrity and representation in demographically trivial positions looks a lot like an obsession with the victors in a winner-take-all labor market (Frank and Cook 1995, 2013; Frank 2001; Fishbacher and Thoni 2008). In some cases, we are looking at a replay of the Horatio Alger myth: "local poor boy makes good through grit and determination, overcoming obstacles," the only difference being the demographic composition of the groups being celebrated. The Horatio Alger myth has been extensively debunked by established social science for many years (Sarachek 1978; Hundley 2008).

Apart from blaming the media (see Schor 1996, 1998), one reason why this obsession happens may be that Americans totally underestimate the sheer levels of inequality around them. Because evidence is considerable that this underestimation exists (and that it is worse in high-inequality environments), many citizen onlookers subconsciously think of their world as looking like the low-inequality ideal type where cultural and structural connections between the justly-celebrated winner and everyone else are plausible (see figure 8). But looking at figure 9, what possible connection or overlap is there? Practically none.

A second possibility is that the winner-take-all nature of markets steers actors toward an undue focus on high status but demographically trivial outcomes (Frank and Cook 1995, 2013; Frank 2001; Fishbacher and Thoni 2008). In winner-take-all settings, people devote large amounts of their time to enhancing their status and focusing on competitions in elite but de-

mographically trivial markets where the winning side represents only a small portion of possible competitors.

In either case, the combined extreme inequality, cultural and structural fragmentation, shrunken status windows and status overlap, and accompanying hypervigilance toward status reduce commitments to the collective good and increase the salience of social status in high-inequality environments. We obsess about high-status, high-stakes, winner-take-all competitions because we are hypersensitive to status and want to assure ourselves that "people like us" can get ahead or are still on top. This leaves the rest of the labor market culturally untouched, even though that is where most of us live.

Business Guru Worship and Fundamental Attribution Error

Another seemingly pervasive feature of high-inequality environments, the United States in particular, is to worship or venerate entrepreneurial elites who make millions of dollars in a short time. The pedagogy of most business school education and the aspirations of most business school students (see Mintzberg 2005) is to "follow in the footsteps" of these gurus and copy their actions in the hopes of striking it big. The case-study method focuses on the biographies of unusually successful companies and individuals in different business domains. The study of such individuals is supposed to provide insights into ways of generating business success based on the narratives that successful entrepreneurs generate about themselves.

In light of our understanding of status windows and status windows overlap in high-inequality environments, we should be skeptical of such portrayals. First, selection effects into the social status of "successful entrepreneur" are considerable. Much of that selection is not tied to anything the individual does. In fact, numerous entrepreneurs have done the same thing and failed. Yet our entrepreneur guru is going to view their behaviors as the reason for their success. Second, success immediately brings forth the fundamental attribution error, the belief that success results from one's own efforts alone. This increases the likelihood

that the successful entrepreneur will draw attention to themselves. Third, the successful entrepreneur in a high-inequality environment will almost immediately be surrounded by other successful people, all of whom share the first two characteristics. Their status window narrows, status overlap with those outside their clique declines, and empathy and understanding go with it. Fourth, our guru then tells their story, blissfully unaware that hundreds or thousands of others have made the same decisions and failed and that much of their success was not due to them and may have simply been luck (Frank 2017). In short, the context picked them, not the other way around.

The same problems multiply when any characteristic or attribute of people in relatively high-status positions is associated with their success. For example, Republicans point out that married people are financially better off than single people, so they conclude that encouraging marriage will "fix" inequality. For Democrats and the Left, the same could be said of education because the college educated make more than those with less education, the "solution" to inequality is more education for those who do not have it even though we don't know what the college treatment is (see Hout 2012; Arum and Roksa 2011). The problem with the reasoning in both of these cases is that selection effects into successful marriage and successful educational pursuit are considerable, and these effects are stronger in a high-inequality environment. In a high-inequality environment, the success of a few is prefaced by a considerable chain of causality that proceeds the final step. The more inequality, the narrower the set of status windows and status overlap that will get any given person or couple to an elite position as a successfully married person or college graduate. In each case, the business guru, the married couple, and the college graduate may believe they have "done everything right" and on the margins this might be true, but it does not automatically follow that others will be better off if they do the same thing.

Each of these examples (lack of consensus on economic redistribution, a near exclusive public focus on high-status but demographically trivial positions, and business guru wor-

ship) suggests that the considerable economic and social segregation of high-inequality environments interferes with our ability to understand social inequality and how it works. This problem occurs because of the relatively narrow status windows (relative to the range of inequality in high-inequality environments) and the relative lack of status window overlap with others who differ significantly from us. In short, rampant social status segregation leads us to believe that either "everyone is just like us" or "we are distinctive, deserving, and everyone could do what we're doing if they would just work hard enough." Neither orientation lends itself to collective action to address wide inequalities.

CONCLUSION

This analysis presents a largely theoretical portrayal of the relationship between binary status characteristics, continuous measures of inequality (income, wealth, socioeconomic status), and our often muddled social and cultural perceptions of social inequality through the concept of status windows and status overlap. It is neatly summarized into five points.

First, people in low-inequality environments have more accurate perceptions of the amount of inequality in their societies than people in high-inequality environments.

Second, in high-inequality environments, the misperception of the amount of inequality is especially high and the underestimation of that inequality especially large.

Third, changes in the levels of underlying inequality in a society change the relative size of individual status windows (the portion of the social inequality system people perceive and experience) and narrow the status overlap between any given person's status window and anyone else's.

Fourth, these narrowed status windows, the social and cultural segregation that is a product and is reinforced by high inequality, and the coarsening of social relationships and rise in status vigilance make social status more salient in high-inequality environments than in low-inequality environments.

Fifth, the heightened vigilance regarding social status and the accompanying shrinking status windows and windows overlap may pro-

vide a way of explaining certain paradoxes that accompany high-inequality environments, including the lack of collective commitment to reducing inequality, the cultural obsession with high-status, but demographically trivial, winner-take-all positions, and the worship of outsized business success (guru worship).

This analysis has two implications. The first is that we need a more extensive focus on status windows themselves and the understandings of the rest of the world that these produce. This research is inherently social psychological and is tied fundamentally to the study of social status. It focuses, however, more on the relationship between social status and continuous measures of inequality. Second, we need to conduct more research on the relationship between overall status processes and the larger contexts where social inequality is produced, especially focusing on high and low-inequality contexts. Ultimately, a world of universal social respect includes attention to high and rising inequality but must increasingly focus on the enhanced social status concerns that high social inequality produces.

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To Forgive Is Divine? Morality and the Status Value of Intergroup Revenge and Forgiveness

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Intergroup conflict is a costly and persistent aspect of social life, and one that often carries great moral significance for those who participate in it. Ostensibly moral behaviors can provide a path to social status in groups, as when self-sacrificing in-group members gain respect and prestige relative to their peers. This article bridges these two ideas to examine the perceived morality and status worthiness of intergroup revenge and forgiveness, and the moral accounts used to justify them. Using an original survey experiment conducted on a national probability sample in the United States, we examine everyday intergroup conflicts across national, sports, and political identities. We find forgiveness is perceived as more moral, and in turn more status worthy, than revenge. Justifications for moral judgments typically drew on accounts of harm/care, reciprocity, and avoiding chaos and disorder. This contributes to research on conflict, group dynamics, status, and morality.

Status is a fundamental dimension of inequality within and between groups. Unlike material forms of inequality, it can emerge only from interactions between others and self, operates through shared beliefs, and cannot be directly seized from others (Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue). Thus individuals are motivated to behave in ways that garner respect and defer-

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ence from others (Bai 2017; Bai, Ho, and Yan 2020; Flynn et al. 2006; Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Milinski, Semmann, and Krambeck 2002; Willer 2009). Existing status research focuses intragroup relations, including the traits, behaviors, and resources that cause some people to have more status than others (Correll and Ridgeway 2006).

Intergroup conflict is an important structural condition shaping these intragroup status processes (Benard et al. 2021; Benard and Doan 2020). Intergroup conflict provides opportunities for individuals to demonstrate valued qualities, such as group commitment, and in doing so gain status in groups. For example, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was widely praised for refusing U.S. offers to evacuate prior to the Russian invasion, instead staying to participate in the defense of Kyiv (Braithwaite 2022; Harris, Francis, and Dixon 2022). In this article, we examine whether perceptions of morality shed light on how conflict behaviors and status processes are related. We aim to understand the relationship between perceived morality, status, and two contrasting responses to conflict: intergroup revenge and forgiveness. To do so, we draw on two findings from recent research.

First, individuals view intergroup conflicts in deeply moral terms, especially when valued in-groups are implicated in these conflicts (Böhm, Thielmann, and Hilbig 2018; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Halevy et al. 2015; Rai and Fiske 2011). Conflict shapes the moral evaluations of behavior and which behaviors are considered moral varies across social contexts (Rai and Fiske 2011). In some cases, aggression is considered heroic when directed at an out-group member but despicable otherwise (Halevy and Cohen 2019). Indeed, in honor cultures, failing to seek revenge for an intergroup affront is shameful (Beckerman et al. 2009; Black-Michaud 1975; Gould 2003). The perceived morality of forgiveness also varies situationally. Forgiveness is viewed as virtuous in some contexts, such as nonviolent civil rights movements (McAdam and Tarrow 2000), but is morally unacceptable in others (Exline et al. 2003). Our work finds that in everyday contexts, intergroup revenge is viewed as less status worthy than forgiveness (Benard et al. 2021).

Second, individuals who demonstrate ostensibly moral behaviors such as altruism, generosity, and self-sacrifice gain social status (Bai 2017; Bai, Ho, and Yan 2020; Flynn et al. 2006; Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Milinski, Semmann, and Krambeck 2002; Willer 2009). Status—the relationships of respect, prestige, and deference within groups—plays a fundamental role in structuring group life and motivating behavior (Anderson and Kilduff 2009; Bales et al. 1951; Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Strodtbeck, James, and Hawkins 1957).

Taken together, the findings that conflict carries moral weight for its participants and that moral behaviors are considered status worthy suggest that conflict provides opportunities to gain status by demonstrating moral behavior. Building on this work and drawing on the status theory of collective action (Willer 2009), costly signaling theories (Spence 1973), and the moral virtue theory of status attainment (Bai 2017), we explore the status value of revenge, forgiveness, and morality in intergroup conflict. We evaluate the perceived morality of revenge and forgiveness, whether moral behaviors are perceived to be status worthy, and whether morality provides a pathway from intergroup revenge or forgiveness to intragroup status. Drawing on moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), we examine the moral accounts used to justify evaluations of revenge and forgiveness as morally right or wrong, and how these accounts are related to perceived status. We evaluate these relationships using original, nationally representative experimental survey data with quantitative and qualitative measures.

This work makes several contributions. We use the concept of morality to bridge existing lines of research on intergroup conflict and the status worthiness of cooperative and competitive behaviors. Intergroup conflict is a persistent and costly aspect of social life as well as a key problem for understanding human groups (Cook 2000; Fiske 2002; Halevy and Cohen 2019). This article elucidates how intergroup conflict and intragroup relations shape one another, a question that has fascinated social scientists for more than a century (Barclay and Benard 2013; Benard and Doan 2011; Coser

1956; Gouldner 1954; Halevy and Cohen 2019; Pickett, Bonner, and Coleman 2002; Sherif 1966; Simmel [1908] 1955; Sumner and Keller 1906). Yet this work rarely focuses on the status dynamics of intergroup relations.

By focusing on status, this article has implications for understanding how conflict shapes status inequality. Within groups, conflict may spur the development of unequal status hierarchies, or high-ranking group members may exploit real or artificial threats to solidify their position (Barclay and Benard 2013; Pickering and Kisangani 2005). Between groups, cycles of revenge may increase intergroup oppression whereas norms of forgiveness may limit these cycles (Corey and Joireman 2004). Finally, this study contributes to understanding the role of status in cycles of conflict. Some groups become locked in recurring conflict; others establish peaceful, productive relations (Fearon and Laitin 1996). Understanding the moral accounts people use to justify forgiveness or vengeance has practical implications for encouraging peaceful intergroup relations. Once identified, these moral accounts could be used to frame conflict prevention messages in ways that are convincing and culturally appropriate.

THEORY

Status is a key factor shaping intragroup relationships. Definitions of the term vary across literatures (Faris 2012; Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Martin 2009). We draw on expectation states theory to use the term to refer to one's place in a group hierarchy of respect, prestige, and deference (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972). Many groups, including work teams, juries, labor unions, and youth gangs, organize themselves along status lines; some group members are accorded greater respect, prestige, and influence than others (Bales et al. 1951; Gould 2003; Sherif 1966; Strodtbeck, James, and Hawkins 1957; Van Vugt, Hogan, and Kaiser 2008). Although symbolic, status is a widely desired social resource with material conse-

quences. It incentivizes contributions to group goals and compliance with group norms while generating inequality and sometimes status competition within groups (Anderson et al. 2012; Anderson and Kilduff 2009; Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Willer 2009).

Paths to Status in Groups

Individuals can follow several paths to status in groups. Historically, most research focuses on a competence-based path (Bai 2017; Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Cheng, Tracy, and Henrich 2010).[1] This approach, elaborated by expectation states theory, argues that status hierarchies emerge when groups aim to collectively address a task or problem (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Correll and Ridgeway 2006). To do so, they evaluate which of their members are expected to make the greatest contribution to solving the problem at hand; these members receive more respect, attention, and deference. The expectation is that deferring to competent group members will improve group performance.

Acknowledging the importance of the competence-based pathway, we focus on prosociality as route to status. Diverse strands of research have identified an alternative set of pathways to status in groups that broadly hinge on gaining status through behaviors that demonstrate valued characteristics other than competence. These characteristics include altruism, sacrifice for other group members, generosity, and trustworthiness. This perspective is derived from expectation states (Ridgeway 1982; Willer 2009) and costly signaling theories (Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Milinski, Semmann, and Krambeck 2002; Nelissen 2008). It argues that individuals who sacrifice for the group's well-being, who are more generous with other group members, or who otherwise incur costs for the group's benefit are presumed to possess greater intrinsic motivation to help the group, trustworthiness, or other group-beneficial qualities (Barclay 2004; Willer 2009).

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1. Individuals can also gain influence in groups through the use of threats and coercion. Although some scholars view this as a path to status (Bai 2017), we see coerced deference as analytically distinct from the voluntarily conferred deference characteristic of status hierarchies (Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue; Henrich and Gil-White 2001).

Two interpretations of why these behaviors translate into greater status and leadership opportunities prevail. The status theory of collective action (Willer 2009) and other signaling-based approaches (Barclay 2004; Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Milinski, Semmann, and Krambeck 2002; Nelissen 2008) suggest that conferring status to those with group-beneficial qualities pays off because they use status and influence to benefit the group. The moral virtue theory of status attainment argues that actors who embody the moral values of their group are perceived as virtuous, or excelling in moral domains, and in turn gain status (Bai 2017; Bai, Ho, and Yan 2020).

To the extent that virtuous behaviors yield group benefits, the moral virtue theory and signaling-based theories overlap. For example, Feng Bai (2017, 208) argues that "to be morally praiseworthy, virtue, inevitably, involves *voluntary* self-sacrifice for the good of others, beyond conformity to moral norms" (emphasis in the original). However, the moral virtue theory also argues that enacting moral values is not necessarily instrumentally beneficial to the group, such as when a moral emphasis on order or obedience impairs performance on group task requiring creativity (Bai 2017, 210), or when acts of altruism leave one too exhausted to contribute to group goals (Bai, Ho, and Yan. 2020, 504). Instead, the mechanism linking virtue to status is a "warm glow" of admiration that enhances one's social standing.

This raises the question of whether behaviors such as altruism, generosity, and self-sacrifice function as costly signals of group motivation, signs of virtuous character, or both. Our data include separate measures of group motivation and perceived morality, allowing us to assess whether the evidence is consistent with one or both pathways.

Research on these pathways to status focuses on behavior that is unambiguously helpful to the group, such as contributing money or effort to group goals (Barclay 2006; Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Willer 2009), or organizational citizenship behaviors (Bai, Ho, and Yan 2020). Assigning status for acts of intergroup revenge or forgiveness is more complicated, because each behavior may be interpreted as a positive or negative contribution to group welfare. In the moment, it can be ambiguous whether revenge or forgiveness will have beneficial consequences. Revenge may signal the group's toughness and cohesion, deterring future threats from out-groups (Gould 2003; Schelling 1980), or it may expose the group to counter-revenge or other sanctions (Nikiforakis and Engelmann 2011). Forgiveness may reduce costly intergroup conflict and provide opportunities for mutually beneficial relationships (Mc-Cullough, Kurzban, and Tabak 2013), or may create the perception that the in-group is faint-hearted, or that the forgiver sympathizes with the out-group (Sherif 1966). This ambiguity may account for the cultural variation in the value placed on revenge, as well as groups' internal conflict about pursuing revenge or forgiveness (Exline et al. 2003).

When individuals make these assessments before the long-term consequences of vengeful or forgiving behavior are known, how do they assign status for these behaviors? Our recent work examines this question (Benard et al. 2021). We use a vignette study depicting an in-group member who is confronted by an out-group member. The out-group member insults the in-group, and the in-group member responds in either a forgiving (encouraging peaceful relations between the two groups) or vengeful manner (verbal retaliation and a shove). Across three identities (national identity, sports fandom, and political party affiliation) we find that the forgiving in-group member is viewed as more group motivated and more status worthy, compared to the vengeful in-group member. Consistent with signaling-based accounts, perceived group motivation partially mediates the effect of forgiveness on status, suggesting that forgiveness leads to status by signaling group motivation.

Extending these findings, we ask here whether forgiveness and revenge are perceived as moral, whether perceived morality increases perceived status, and whether it does so separately from group motivation. We investigate how people justify the moral judgments they make about revenge and forgiveness. We then examine whether these judgments are correlated with the status worthiness of morality.

Because group solidarity is amplified through "enthusiastic participation in group rituals" that feel righteous and morally good (Collins 1990), a better understanding of the moral foundations used to justify revenge and forgiveness elucidates an underexplored dimension of group cohesion, hierarchy, and social status. These questions follow.

Q1: Is forgiveness or revenge more often viewed as morally right?

We investigate whether revenge or forgiveness is more often viewed as morally right. Drawing on data from a vignette study of revenge and forgiveness (Benard et al. 2021), we examine an open-ended item in which respondents were asked to make moral assessments of vengeful or forgiving behavior. According to the moral virtue theory of status attainment, if one behavior is viewed as more morally right, it should be viewed as more status worthy (Bai 2017). We made no predictions as to whether revenge or forgiveness will more often be viewed as morally right, given that each behavior could be interpreted as morally right or wrong.

Q2: What moral accounts do people draw on to justify moral judgments about revenge and forgiveness?

After assessing the perceived morality of revenge or forgiveness, we evaluate why people perceive revenge or forgiveness as morally right or wrong. To do so, we asked survey respondents to explain their moral judgments of the forgiving or vengeful behavior in the survey vignette. To analyze these accounts in a theoretically informed way, we drew on moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). This theory argues that humans have a set of evolved but culturally and socially modifiable moral foundations. Although the exact number and nature of these foundations is debated, much work focuses on five: harm-care, fairness-reciprocity, in-group-loyalty, authority-respect, and purity-sanctity. As the names suggest, the harm-care foundation focuses on caring for others and avoiding causing harm, and the fairness-reciprocity foundation on issues of justice and cooperation. These are the "individualizing" foundations (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek

2009). The latter three are the "binding" foundations, for their presumed role in maintaining social solidarity through group loyalty, subservience to group hierarchies, and respecting cultural boundaries.

For our purposes, we are less concerned with whether the theory's underlying assumptions are correct (for example, whether moral foundations are evolved cultural universals or primarily intuitive versus reasoned; see Smith et al. 2017). Instead, our interest lies in the fact that these foundations are widely valued, to differing degrees, in a broad range of cultural settings, and so make a logical starting point for understanding the perceived morality of revenge and forgiveness. In our coding, we also inductively capture respondents' understanding of other moral values beyond these five foundations.

Q3: Does perceived morality mediate the relationship between forgiveness and status?

We next assess whether demonstrating morality through vengeful or forgiving behaviors provides a path to status. If one of these behaviors is viewed as more morally right, the moral virtue theory of status attainment predicts it should also be viewed as more status worthy. Our work finds that individuals gain status from forgiving behavior, in part because it signals group motivation (Benard et al. 2021). Given the broad theoretical similarity between signaling and morality-based approaches—in that each suggests that certain behaviors are taken as a sign of desirable underlying qualities, and therefore status worthy—we assess whether the evidence is more consistent with morality and group motivation as separate or overlapping paths.

Q4: Are specific moral accounts differentially related to status?

As an exploratory step, we examined whether some moral accounts elicit more status than others. For example, are behaviors viewed as morally right because they are caring perceived as more or less status worthy than those viewed as morally right because they are reciprocal? Existing theory suggests that whether a behavior is viewed as morally right shapes its per-

ceived status worthiness (Bai 2017), but we know of no work on the status worthiness of specific moral foundations. We examine this question in two ways. We assess whether mean levels of perceived status differ by specific moral accounts. We also examine whether specific moral accounts play a role in mediating the effect of forgiveness-revenge on status.

METHODS

To answer our research questions, we conducted a nationally representative online survey experiment using NORC's AmeriSpeak panel, as part of a larger study we conducted on the status value of group motivated revenge and forgiveness (Benard et al. 2021). The AmeriSpeak panel uses a two-stage probability sample design based on the NORC National Sample Frame (Dennis 2017). Panelists are recruited into the sample and agree to complete two to three short surveys per month. A sample of 2,116 respondents were recruited for the study. Of these, thirty (1.4 percent) skipped all survey items. Of the 2,086 remaining, 1,928 (92.4 percent) responded to the morality question. An additional fifteen skipped all of the items in the status or group motivation scales, leaving 1,913 respondents for analysis (90 percent of the total sample).[2]

Procedure

After providing informed consent, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to gauge important in-groups. All respondents were U.S. citizens, providing one (national) in-group identity. Respondents were also asked about political party identification, whether they had a favorite sports team and, if so, to name the team. Following these preliminary questions, we elicited perceived out-groups from respondents with political party and sports team identifications by asking which political party's interests most conflict with their own party's interests, and which sports team is

the biggest rival of their favorite team. We treat these identities as three conceptual replications based on national identity, sports fandom, and political party affiliation, to evaluate the robustness of the findings and map variation across key social identities such as vocations and avocations (sports fandom), political affiliation, ethnicity and religion broadly conceived (national identity) (Deaux et al. 1995).[3] These identities are widely held, making them practical for use in a study of the general population. Pilot testing indicated that individuals holding these identities can easily identify rival out-groups.

Using these responses, respondents were randomly assigned to an identity scenario based on their in-group memberships. Respondents who identified with all three groups were randomly assigned to one of the three. Respondents who identified with either a political party or a sports team were randomly assigned to scenarios corresponding to one of the two identities they had. The survey was programmed to keep the sizes of the scenarios relatively equal (between 625 and 658 respondents per scenario).

After making assignments to a scenario, we measured respondents' identification with the in-group along with the perceived level of conflict with the out-group. In the broader study, respondents were then randomly assigned to one of the four between-subjects experimental conditions (vignette character's behavior: forgiving-vengeful × vignette character's stated motivation: group-individual benefit). Here we focus on the behavior factor (whether the vignette character behaves in a forgiving or vengeful manner). We find few differences by group motivation in the outcomes of interest (for details, see Benard et al. 2021); thus we present results collapsed across the motivation conditions to save space. Respondents read a vignette that corresponded to the condition and scenario they were assigned, specific po-

2. Sample demographics are included in online supplement 1. All supplemental materials can be viewed at https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/8/6/122/tab-supplemental.

3. Kay Deaux and her colleagues use these labels broadly: the *ethnicity* cluster includes regional identities such as Southerner, racial identities such as African American, and national identities such as American.

litical party or sports in-groups and out-groups derived from their responses earlier in the survey.[4]

The vignette asked respondents to imagine witnessing a chance encounter between two strangers in a public setting. This setting was a local tourist attraction in the national identity scenario, a protest in the political affiliation scenario, and the parking lot of a game between the respondent's favorite team and a rival team in the sports fandom scenario.[5] In each scenario, the vignette describes an out-group member insult an in-group member, using a group-based insult. For example, in the sports scenario, the out-group members says, "Watch where you put your stuff, jerk! All you [In-group] fans are such idiots!" Depending on the experimental condition, the in-group member responds in either a forgiving or vengeful manner, and then turns to a friend and provides either an individually motivated or group-motivated explanation for their behavior. Following the vignette, respondents evaluated the perceived social status of the in-group vignette character, completed manipulation check questions, and answered additional items, including the morality measure and items used in the moderation analysis.

Key Variables

Forgiveness. Our primary independent variable is a condition indicator for whether the in-group vignette character behaves in a forgiving or vengeful manner (1 = forgiving, 0 = vengeful). In the forgiveness condition, the in-group member tells the out-group member that they do not need to argue, and recommends that each person return to their original activities (such as enjoying the game or expressing themselves at the protest). This is consistent with scholarship viewing forgiveness as a proactive effort to improve intergroup relations, not solely the absence of revenge (McCullough 2001; McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak 2013). In the revenge condition, the in-group member shoves the out-group member and issues a verbal warning. A manipulation check using two 9-point, Likert-type items finds that respondents viewed the focal character as significantly more forgiving in the forgiving vignette relative to the vengeful vignette (M = 6.54 vs. M = 4.11, $t = -27.65$, $p < .0005$, two-tailed).[6]

Perceived Group Motivation. We used two 9-point, Likert-type items to measure perceived group motivation. We asked respondents to assess the extent to which the vignette character was mostly concerned with helping himself or [other in-group members] and acting on his behalf or on behalf of [other in-group members], averaged to form a scale ($\alpha = .84$).

Moral Evaluation. Morality is measured qualitatively with a two-part question and coded into two separate measures.[7] The first question asks respondents, "Thinking about how the [in-group member], handled this situation, would you say that their response was morally right or wrong?" We coded responses into four mutually exclusive categories: "yes," if the respondent believed the behavior was morally right ("Yes, I think it was morally right"), "no," if the respondent believed the behavior was morally wrong ("I do not believe that morally it was appropriate"), "maybe," which included statements that were neutral, ambivalent, or

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4. In developing the vignettes, we read news articles and watched social media videos depicting similar altercations. We elicited feedback from two introductory sociology classes (*n* = 25 and *n* = 40) and pilot tested the vignettes on Amazon's mTurk platform. NORC also conducted and provided recordings for cognitive interviews with survey respondents (*n* = 9).

5. Full text of all scenarios is available in online supplement 7.

6. An additional two participants did not fill out the forgiving-vengeful manipulation check questions, leaving an analytic sample of 1,911 for the manipulation check only. The manipulation check consisted of two items: the extent which the in-group member was viewed as not forgiving or forgiving and vengeful or not vengeful, on 9-point bipolar scales. These were averaged to form a single measure ($\alpha = .83$).

7. Teams of coders coded each item until they reached acceptable levels of interrater reliability; the minimum threshold was a Krippendorf's alpha of 0.9. Open codes were developed using pilot test data from Amazon's mTurk platform. For more details of the coding procedure, see online supplement 8.

mixed ("It was neither right or wrong; it had a little of both"), and "other," which included statements that did not assess the action's morality ("I don't think morality came into play in this situation").[8]

Moral Accounts. Our second measure of morality captures moral values respondents drew on to explain their moral judgment. After their moral evaluation, we ask respondents, "What made it right or wrong?" As noted, our initial set of coding categories drew on five moral foundations specified by moral foundations theory—harm-care, fairness-reciprocity, in-group–loyalty, authority-respect, and purity-sanctity (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009)— but we also used open coding to identify moral accounts that did not fit into these categories.

Following the open coding, the final codebook included a total of nine codes for moral justifications: harm-care, fairness, reciprocity, chaos-disorder, in-group–loyalty, respect-authority, purity-sanctity, self-control, and out-group–related justifications. The harm-care code was used for evaluations of morality that drew on people being harmed or cared for, either physically or emotionally ("I think it was morally wrong; I don't think favorably of being physically aggressive with others or harming them emotionally"). We divided fairness and reciprocity into two codes, due to a tendency for respondents in our pilot data to distinguish between these moral justifications. Respondents tended to use fairness to denote unjust treatment, such as being the object of stereotyping (for example, one respondent in the sports identity scenario felt it was wrong for a vignette character to assume all fans of a team have similar characteristics: "Also he stereotyped the other fan as all of them being the same which is not right either"), and used reciprocity tended to denote a disproportionate response ("It was not morally right in that they made a big fuss over nothing").

We included a code for chaos-disorder, which is sometimes grouped with authority in moral foundations theory. Our respondents used this type of reasoning to denote morality based on whether the in-group member's actions caused or could have caused chaos or disorder: "I think this person is probably morally right, because they . . . avoided a larger conflict that might have unintended consequences (stabbing, shooting, expulsion from parking lot)."

Codes for in-group loyalty were used for justifications around the idea of betraying or not betraying one's in-group ("He did the right thing because he spoke out in defense of someone else . . . [and] because he was part of a group trying to persuade others and he made his side look more reasonable"). The respect-authority codes were used for moral accounts drawing on the respect for authorities, other people, or social traditions. We coded for purity-sanctity for justifications drawing on notions of disgust, purity, and standards of decency ("They did not fire back with the same type of vulgar language").

We developed two novel codes through open coding. One, which we called self-control, captured evaluations of morality that take into account whether or not someone demonstrated self-control or restraint ("I believe it was morally right. He took the high road. He could've insulted the foreign tourist in retaliation but chose not to"). The second, which we called moral-out, captured references to the out-group's morality (or lack of morality).

Respondents gave different moral accounts for their assessments of the vignette character's behavior, depending on whether the behavior was vengeful or forgiving and whether it was perceived as morally right or wrong. Categories do not sum to 100 percent because responses could be coded into multiple categories, or none of the categories.

Status. Respondents rated how the in-group member "is probably viewed in groups that he belongs to" on five 9-point, bipolar scales: respected, honorable, influential, a leader, and prominent (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000; Willer 2009). These items were average to create a single status measure ($\alpha = .88$).

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8. Spelling errors in survey responses are in the original. Quotations marks have been added or adjusted for clarity as needed.

Analytic Strategy

To succinctly present the results, we pooled data across the three identity scenarios for the analyses presented in the main text. Perceived morality was largely similar when examining the three identity scenarios separately.[9] Our analyses proceed in four steps. First, we evaluate whether forgiveness is viewed as more moral and status worthy than revenge using tests of proportions across the conditions. Second, we present our qualitative results outlining accounts respondents give in justifying their moral evaluations and test for differences in the prevalence of these moral accounts across conditions. Third, we conduct a mediation analysis to see whether moral evaluation and moral accounts explain status differences between forgiving and vengeful group members. Best practices are debated for both control variables and survey weights when it comes to survey experiments (Miratrix et al. 2018). In keeping with traditional presentations of experimental results, we present unweighted models without controls.[10] In supplementary analyses, we evaluated whether the perceived morality of revenge or forgiveness varied by individual-level factors such as strength of group identity or demographics.[11] While there is some individual-level variation, for example, those strongly identified with the group and men are more likely to view revenge as morally right, the overall patterns were similar to those in the main text.

RESULTS

In this section, we examine four research questions: whether revenge and forgiveness are perceived as morally right or wrong, what justifications are offered for these judgments, whether morality provides a path to status in groups, and whether specific moral accounts vary in their perceived status worthiness.

Q1: Is forgiveness perceived as more moral?

Table 1 includes mean status ratings and comparisons across conditions of the proportion of respondents who viewed the focal vignette character's behavior as morally right, morally wrong, morally ambiguous, or something else altogether. Our prior work using these data shows that forgiveness is more status worthy than revenge (Benard et al. 2021). This result is replicated here ($M = 6.46$ in the forgiveness condition vs. $M = 5.05$ in the revenge condition, $p < .001$). We also ask whether forgiveness is viewed as more moral than revenge. As the table indicates, 76 percent of respondents viewed the forgiving vignette character as morally right compared to 20 percent who viewed the vengeful vignette character as morally right ($\Delta = 0.56$, $p < .001$, two-tailed). Inversely, respondents are also less likely to view forgiveness as morally wrong (7 percent) versus revenge (55 percent; $\Delta = 0.48$, $p < .001$). Also shown in table 1, a small proportion of respondents gave ambivalent evaluations, about 2.5 percent in each condition, indicating that Americans tend to not equivocate or have trouble determining the morality of forgiveness compared to revenge. More respondents gave nonevaluative responses than ambivalent ones; respondents were also significantly more likely to give nonevaluative responses in the revenge condition than the forgiveness condition (Pr("Other"|Revenge) = 0.22 vs. Pr("Other"|Forgiveness) = 0.14, $p < .001$).

Collectively, the results indicate that Americans are more likely to view forgiveness in this setting as status worthy, more likely to view it as morally right, less likely to view it as morally wrong, and more likely to give it an evaluation than they are revenge. The proportion of respondents who viewed the focal character's behavior as morally wrong is not merely a reflection of those who did not view it as morally right, suggesting that moral evaluation is not black and white. Indeed, a sizable minority of respondents do not view the given scenario as at all relating to morality. To better understand the social construction of morality, we examine different moral accounts respondents give to justify their moral evaluation.

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9. See online supplement 2.

10. For robustness checks, models with controls and those with survey weights are presented in online supplements 3 and 4. Results are substantively similar to those presented here.

11. See online supplement 6.

Table 1. Means by Condition

Variable (Range)	Revenge Condition		Forgiveness Condition		Overall	
	Mean-Proportion	SD	Mean-Proportion	SD	Mean-Proportion	SD
Status (1–9)	5.05***	1.72	6.46***	1.66	5.74	1.83
Morally right (0–1)	0.20***		0.76***		0.48	
Morally wrong (0–1)	0.55***		0.07***		0.31	
Morally ambiguous (0–1)	0.03		0.03		0.03	
Amoral (0–1)	0.22***		0.14***		0.18	

Source: Authors' tabulation.

*** *p* < .001 difference is significantly different across conditions (two-tailed tests)

Q2: What moral accounts do people draw on to justify moral judgments about revenge and forgiveness?

Although all nine values were given to justify respondents' moral evaluations, one received a clear plurality of support for three of the four revenge-forgiveness x morally right-wrong categories (see figure 1). Among respondents who viewed revenge as morally right, a plurality (37 percent, *n* = 73/198) justified this evaluation based on reciprocity. Those who viewed revenge as morally wrong focused on the harm caused by revenge (37 percent, *n* = 201/537). Among respondents who viewed forgiveness as morally right, a plurality (27 percent, *n* = 192/714) focused on forgiveness as a means to combat chaos and disorder. It is less clear why some respondents viewed forgiveness as morally wrong, in part because so few did. Parsing these responses suggests that respondents in this category felt that even the forgiving response was too assertive, and that the focal character should have either ignored the antagonist or been more apologetic. This included statements such as "The American could have just said "excuse me" or quietly moved away from the foreign tourist"; and "His response did not even take into consideration the feelings of the visitors. He was completely self centered. Thus leaned very much towards wrong."

As figure 1 shows, reciprocity, harm, and chaos are three primary moral accounts used across moral evaluations. Interestingly, reciprocity—the account most used to argue for the moral rightness of revenge—was also the second most commonly invoked account to argue that revenge is morally wrong (18 percent, *n* = 96). Respondents who invoked reciprocity viewed the shove as a disproportionate response, and therefore in violation of the principle of reciprocity. Thus the difference appears to hinge on whether a verbal insult is viewed as provocative enough to justify physical retaliation. Respondents in the camp viewing retaliation as a violation of the reciprocity principle made arguments such as "He was morally wrong. A person does not have to act that way over such a small issue"; "He was not morally right, because he had not been touched. He took it upon himself to make the issue a physical one"; and "Morally wrong for sure. There's not reason to fight over something so silly like that."

In contrast, many of reciprocity-based explanations for why revenge is morally right cited a right—and in some cases an obligation—to stand up for oneself and one's in-groups, as illustrated by the following examples:

"We still have an honor culture particularly in some parts of the country and it is morally right to stand up against some insulting you, or your country. It was right because it was in response to an unreasonable insult.

Figure 1. Proportions of Moral Accounts by Condition and Moral Evaluation
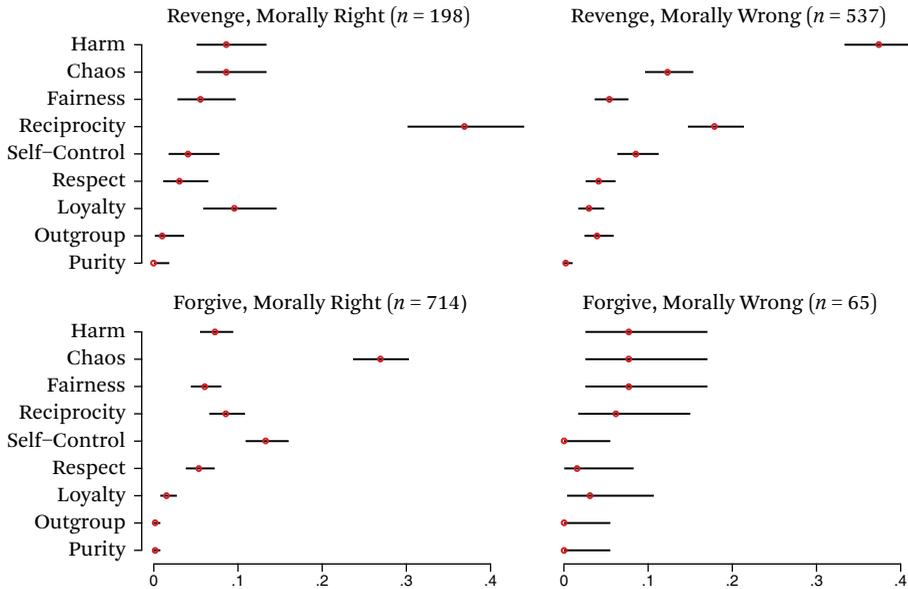
Source: Authors' tabulation.

An insult against ALL Americans. IF it had just been personal, it would be easy to ignore, or end with a go F*** yourself and move on. The foreigner insulted an entire nation and its population. It should have been answered."

"Morally right up to a point. He shouldn't have to accept being talked to like that (generalized as an 'ugly American'), but the shoving and escalation didn't really help the perception of Americans in this situation. If I had to choose him acting this way, or doing nothing, I would go with this response honestly. That's probably a bit of my overt patriotism coming out there—'no one should talk bad about the USA.'"

"Morally right—yes. He had a right to protect his honor and that of his associates. If someone was to call his wife a whore would he not have the moral right and near-duty to defend her honor? This situation is not as drastic, but it is the same principle."

These points were also echoed in shorter comments, such as "because as a human you don't just stand there and take another persons abuse because they believe in another system";

"He was just sticking up for his party"; and "stood up for what he believes in."

Those who viewed revenge as morally wrong most commonly gave harm or care-related justifications. Many viewed the escalation from a verbal dispute to physical aggression as intrinsically wrong: "It was wrong. You shouldn't react that way to someone's words. You definitely shouldn't get physical." "Morally wrong. It is never ok to put your hands on another person." "Morally wrong, because he sought to do the other person physical harm."

Along these lines, other responses argued for a more forgiving response: "Wrong. Give people a chance. Intolerance and violence shouldn't be the gut reaction. The American tourist should have moved on considering he knew nothing of the other person's situation." "Wrong, because if you love your neighbor as yourself, you wouldn't respond that way. A gentle answer turns away wrath, love your enemies. Hurt people hurt people. . . . Love is the only right response."

Respondents who viewed forgiveness as morally right most often justified this assessment with accounts of chaos-disorder. These accounts focused on efforts to deescalate the situation: "Morally right; he took what could be

Table 2. Coefficients from KHB Mediation Analysis of Status on Moral Evaluation

	$b_{Forgiveness}$	SE	Proportion of Difference
Reduced	1.41	0.07***	
Full	0.49	0.08***	
Difference	0.92	0.06***	
Moral evaluation	0.40	0.04***	43.67
Group motivation	0.52	0.05***	56.33

Source: Authors' tabulation.

*** *p* < .001 (two-tailed tests)

an explosive situation and tamped it down." "He was right not to say anything at the time things could have spiraled out of control." "I think he handled the situation well, deescalating rather than going to the easier route and arguing back; there's no moral high ground to starting a fight."

A number of responses concern the potential spread of disorder: "He was right to diffuse the situation and prevent it from becoming a physical altercation or one that would have ruined either group's night." "I would say it was right. The reason it was right, the Eagles fan had the foresight to see a major brawl could have erupted if he had chose to be a combatant with the Cowboys fan." "Right, What made it right was he didn't contribute to an unnecessary uproar and spoil everybody's good time. A true warrior wins the fight by avoiding it altogether."

Q3: Is morality a pathway to status?

Our previous work finds that forgiving individuals are perceived to be greater in status than vengeful individuals in part because they are perceived as more group motivated (Benard et al. 2021). We assess whether respondents also perceive forgiving individuals as more status worthy because they perceive them as more moral. We evaluate whether the results are consistent with morality and group motivation serving as separate paths to status.

We evaluate this question using the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) method, which allows for multiple mediators and comparisons across models with continuous and binary responses (Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011). We use the *khb* command in Stata to fit a reduced model (no mediators) which regresses status on the forgiving-vengeful condition (forgiving = 1), using the group-individual motivation condition as a control (group motivation = 1), and a full model that includes a binary indicator for whether the respondent viewed the behavior as morally right (1 = morally right, 0 = all other assessments), and the measure of perceived group motivation as mediators.

Table 2 includes the coefficients from the reduced and full models as well as the breakdown of the indirect effect of forgiveness through moral evaluation.[12] The total effect of the forgiving manipulation is *b* = 1.4 (table 2), indicating that controlling for the group motivation manipulation, respondents view forgiving actors as 1.4 scale points more status worthy than vengeful actors. The total indirect effect via the mediators is 0.92 (*p* < .001). The model thus estimates that, of the 1.4-point increase in perceived status in the forgiving condition, 0.92 points (66 percent) are transmitted indirectly, through increases in perceived group motivation and morality. Of this total indirect effect, 0.52 points (57 percent) are estimated to occur through perceived group motivation and 0.40 points (43 percent) through perceived morality.[13]

12. Detailed results are included in online supplement 5.

13. We conducted a sensitivity analysis of the indirect effect, using the *multimed* command in R (Tingley et al. 2014). This indicated that indirect effect of morality is expected to be 0 when the amount of residual variance

Figure 2. Mean Status by Moral Account
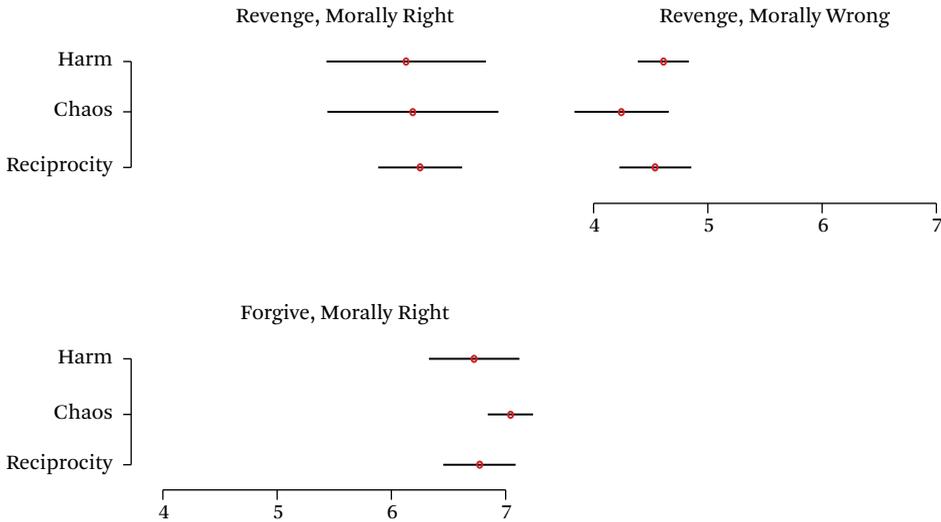
Source: Authors' tabulation.

Q4: Are specific moral accounts differentially related to status?

We explored whether specific moral accounts are differentially related to status. Extending the mediation model in table 2, we fit an alternative model that adds three common moral accounts (reciprocity = 1; harm = 1; chaos = 1) as potential mediators.[14] These models find little evidence that moral accounts independently explain the total effect of forgiveness on status net of moral evaluation and group motivation, so we do not include them in our final mediation analysis.

Indeed, when we examined mean status by the three most commonly offered moral accounts: reciprocity, chaos, and harm, we found that status varied little by moral account. Figure 2 presents status by moral account, graphed separately by revenge-forgiveness condition and moral evaluation (right-wrong) to avoid confounding moral accounts with the experimental conditions or perceived morality. We limited our assessment to these three moral accounts due to sample size issues. Because only four to five respondents both viewed forgive-

ness as morally wrong and cited one of these three moral accounts, we exclude this category from the graph. Even with these steps, only seventeen respondents who viewed revenge as morally right cited chaos or harm in their justifications. The other categories ranged from fifty-two to 201 observations. Status did not appear to be driven by the moral account offered. Instead, whether the behavior was viewed as morally right or wrong was the main factor determining status worthiness.

DISCUSSION

Intergroup conflict is an influential, recurrent, and costly part of social life. It presents dilemmas without clear solutions: will retaliating for this grievance deter future aggression from rivals or perpetuate an endless cycle of retaliation? Will forgiving my enemy lead to productive, peaceful relationships, or is it a sucker's bet? This ambiguity likely underlies the variation in the kinds of behaviors that groups value in conflict. Why do we valorize those who make peace with rival out-groups at certain times but elevate those who destroy our rivals at other

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explained by interaction heterogeneity is 16 percent, or when the total amount of variance explained by interaction heterogeneity is 10.5 percent (available from the authors).

14. See online supplement 5.

times? The answers to these questions implicate key human motives, relationships, and social structures, as we seek to manage our often-competing interests, loyalty and attachment to in-groups, and striving for prestige, honor, and respect.

Increasingly, scholars have recognized that morality is closely intertwined with these factors. Indeed, morality and a sense of moral righteousness is interwoven and essential to furthering a group's political goals, status claims, and their intragroup cohesion (Koenig 2022, this issue). Further, participating in conflicts is not only a way toward a policy goal, but also a way to establish oneself as a moral, status-worthy group member (Leicht 2022, this issue).

Building on this recognition of the importance of morality in motivating group behaviors, we ask whether revenge or forgiveness are seen as morally right, why respondents view them this way, and whether moral behavior in conflict provides a path to status in groups. We examine whether the status worthiness of moral behavior varies based on the specific moral account attached to that behavior.

We answer these questions by extending prior work on group-motivated revenge and forgiveness. We find that, for the conflict we examined, forgiveness was more often viewed as morally right than revenge. We find evidence consistent with the idea that morality serves as a pathway to intragroup status, alongside perceived group motivation. Respondents who viewed forgiveness as morally right most often justified these evaluations in terms of the chaos and disorder avoided, whereas those who viewed revenge as morally right most often drew on the reciprocity principle. Respondents who viewed revenge as morally wrong most often drew on the harm-care principle, but a substantial number also viewed revenge as a disproportionate violation of the reciprocity principle. Our results suggest that, despite the different accounts that Americans draw on to make sense of their moral evaluations, these accounts do not themselves create status differentials. Instead, moral evaluations coexist with established mediators such as group motivation in creating status differentials.

It is likely that the extent to which conflict produces opportunities to gain or lose status is moderated by other group characteristics, such as the degrees of compression, clarity, and rigidity in status hierarchies (Accominotti, Lynn, and Sauder 2022, this issue). For example, occupants of rigid status hierarchies may be less inclined to participate in intergroup conflict, given the relatively low possibility of gaining status by doing so. Collectively, these results point to moral evaluations as a key mechanism to create status differences and inequality within groups and highlight the contours of social groups for whom it is a stronger mechanism.

Our findings also have implications for social inequalities. Within groups, conflict can create or exacerbate unequal status hierarchies, as Georg Simmel ([1908] 1955) suggests. Leaders can exploit conflict to fend off competitors for their position (Barclay and Benard 2013; Pickering and Kisangani 2005). These processes might also lead some group members to have higher propensities to bear the individual-level burdens of these group-motivated behaviors. For example, if participating in conflict is primarily a way for low-status individuals to gain status, then low-status individuals may be disproportionately exposed to violence. Between groups, norms of revenge versus forgiveness can encourage intergroup oppression and create vicious cycles of revenge (Papachristos 2014).

Limitations

Our design has a number of strengths. By using a national probability sample, subdivided into three conceptual replications based on different group identities, as well as experimentally manipulating vengeful and forgiving behavior, we seek a balance of both external and internal validity. Our use of both closed and open-ended questions allows us to test our research questions yet remain open to new insights. That said, our findings could be strengthened or extended in several ways.

First, we examine a specific scenario: witnessing an out-group member insult an in-group member in a public setting, and the in-group member responding. The high cost of fielding a large, nationally representative sample placed some limitations on the number of

conditions and scenarios we could examine. We adopted this particular scenario in part because it provides a look at more common, everyday forms of conflict that many people experience, rather than the lethal violence examined in a number of other studies of intergroup revenge (Gould 2003; Papachristos 2009). We also use this design because it captures a crucial moment in conflict—the instance when a verbal dispute might become a physical one. Recent work suggests that conflict is costly in part because it has a tendency to reverberate through social networks via cycles of retaliation and score settling (Papachristos 2014). Understanding when people do and do not approve of group members crossing this line helps us understand the conditions under which conflicts are more likely to spiral out of control.

The relative value groups place on revenge and forgiveness likely varies across structural and cultural factors. Our findings provide a starting point for mapping the morality of revenge and forgiveness cross-culturally. For example, the finding that forgiveness is most often viewed as morally right because of its role in preventing chaos and disorder suggests that forgiveness should be more valued as the likelihood or costs of disorder increase or in cultures in which avoiding disorder is emphasized.

Another limitation of our study is that our mediators and outcome variables—status, group motivation, and morality—are measured cross-sectionally. This means that, although we have causal evidence of the effect of revenge and forgiveness on these variables, we do not have causal evidence of the mediating effect. We also cannot be sure that perceptions of morality and group motivation are fully separate pathways to status. Future work could manipulate these pathways to tease out their causal link to status.

Finally, our study uses a vignette design and thus measures attitudes rather than behavior. We view this design as appropriate for our research because we sought to understand how people view acts of revenge and forgiveness and not whether respondents could predict their own vengeful or forgiving behavior. We ask respondents about relatively common, everyday conflicts of the type that they have likely witnessed in person, read about, or seen on social media. We do not ask them to form opinions about rare or extremely emotional events, or to report their opinions about highly personal or controversial issues. This study focuses on questions we believe our respondents will be both willing and able to answer.

CONCLUSION

People view intergroup forgiveness as moral and correspondingly status worthy while praising its value in preventing chaos and disorder in intergroup conflict. Yet this finding is not universal: some respondents judged revenge to be morally right. These findings highlight the value of morality as a link between two productive, but largely separate literatures: those on intergroup conflict and social status. Concepts of morality are bound up in group identities, and thus play a key role in conflict. At the same time, ostensibly moral behaviors, such as altruism, generosity, and self-sacrifice, are judged to be both moral and status worthy. Intergroup forgiveness illustrates both of these tendencies: forgivers are perceived as moral and group motivated, and both motives appear to increase perceived status worthiness. More broadly, this work speaks to the fundamental idea that conflict between groups shapes relationships between groups. Adding to a large body of work on the cohesion-shaping effects of conflict, we contribute to a growing set of findings indicating that conflict shapes intragroup status structures as well. In contributing to our conceptual understanding of intergroup conflict, we aim to lay the groundwork for practical steps toward reducing the costs of conflict.

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