

STATUS INEQUALITY AND STATUS HIERARCHIES

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RÉSUMÉ. — Le statut — la valeur accordée aux individus par autrui — est une dimension fondamentale de la stratification sociale. Il existe cependant une ambiguïté quant à ce que les sociologues entendent par différences de statut : s'agit-il de différences dans la quantité globale d'estime que les individus reçoivent d'autrui, ou dans la manière dont ils répartissent leur estime entre divers autres ? À partir de cette distinction, cet article propose d'organiser la recherche récente sur le statut en deux grandes approches : la première étudie l'*inégalité de statut*, ou l'inégalité dans la somme d'estime ou de respect que différents acteurs reçoivent des autres ; la seconde étudie les *hiérarchies de statut*, ou les relations de supériorité, d'égalité, et d'infériorité de valeur que chacun perçoit entre les autres. Passant en revue des travaux sur les hiérarchies raciales, professionnelles, de genre, ou sur la dynamique des petits groupes, je montre que l'inégalité de statut est un phénomène structurel dont on cherche généralement à expliquer l'intensité, tandis que les hiérarchies de statut sont des schémas culturels dont on peut examiner le contenu, la forme, le caractère plus ou moins partagé, et les modes d'acquisition, qu'il s'agisse de hiérarchies spécifiques ou d'un *œil hiérarchique* plus générique porté sur le monde social.

MOTS-CLÉS. — Stratification sociale ; inégalités de statut ; hiérarchies de statut ; sociologie culturelle ; psychologie sociale.

ABSTRACT.— Status—the value people are accorded by others—is a basic dimension of social stratification. There is, however, an ambiguity as to what sociologists mean when they talk about status differences: they can be differences in the overall amount of esteem individuals receive from various others; or differences in how any individual distributes their esteem over a population of others. Building on this distinction, this review essay shows that recent status scholarship can be usefully organized into two broad approaches: the first studies *status inequality*, or inequality in the displays of esteem or deference people amass from all others in social life; the second studies *status hierarchies*, or sets of relations of value superiority, equality, and inferiority people perceive among others. While status inequality is a structural phenomenon that is often examined for its winner-take-all character, status hierarchies are cultural phenomena that can be studied for their content,

shape, sharedness, as well as for how individuals acquire both specific status hierarchies and a broader “hierarchical gaze” on their environment. To make these points, I review empirical work on a wide range of status systems, from small peer groups to racial hierarchies and occupational prestige hierarchies.

KEYWORDS. – Social Stratification; Status Inequality; Status Hierarchies; Cultural Sociology; Social Psychology.

Of Max Weber’s (1968) three dimensions of social stratification—class, status, and power—status has long been, if not the poor relation, certainly the more poorly understood. At the root of this poor understanding is the fundamental difference that sets status aside from its two conceptual counterparts, namely the fact that, unlike wealth and power, status cannot be unilaterally seized (Ridgeway, 1984: 62). Instead, an actor’s social status, or the value others accord her in a given social context, lies entirely in the way this actor *is regarded by others* (Ridgeway & Walker, 1995; Sørensen, 2001; Ollivier, 2004; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In that sense, status is essentially a symbolic quantity: it is in the eye of the beholder, and while it may make sense to say that someone has power or wealth without others’ knowledge, “it makes no sense to say that someone has [status] even though nobody realizes it” (Gould, 2003: 7).

This fundamental difference in the nature of status has led to a nontrivial amount of confusion in the analysis of what sociologists often care about when they are interested in power, wealth, or, indeed, status—that is, in the analysis of how different people possess these resources to different extents. Differences in power or wealth may be difficult to measure accurately. From a conceptual perspective, however, there is little ambiguity to what we mean when we talk about wealth or power disparities: they are differences in the amounts of these resources that are enjoyed by different individuals or by different social groups. The fact that status is essentially an attributed resource, by contrast, creates an analytical forking path when it comes to conceptualizing status disparities. On the one hand, we may want to approach these disparities “from the receiver’s perspective,” by measuring the amount of esteem, respect, or recognition individuals receive from various others, and by examining how this amount differs across receiving individuals. On the other hand, though, we could also decide to study status differences “from the sender’s perspective,” by focusing on how any individual actor

distributes their esteem, respect, or recognition over a population of others—or to put it sharply, by looking at how any actor values others relative to one another.

This ambiguity in what we mean when we say we study status disparities—are they differences in the overall amount of esteem various people receive from all others, or differences in the amount of esteem the same individual directs to various others? —pervades scholarship on status hierarchies. In fact, this article argues that it is possible to organize contributions to this scholarship into two broad and relatively separate (though by no means entirely disconnected) camps, depending on the side they take when it comes to defining status disparities. At core, then, I here argue that there is not just one, but *two* literatures on status hierarchies, two literatures that do not just address different aspects of the same thing, but whose very definition of their object is so different to begin with that they might as well be viewed as studying different things. In light of this, I propose that we dissipate the ambiguity surrounding the concept of status hierarchies by using different names for the different things we study when we say we study them. Specifically, I suggest that research using the category to designate differences in the overall amount of esteem, respect, or deference different actors receive from various others—that is, research defining status hierarchies “from the receiver’s perspective”—is really interested in what we might better label *status inequality*. On the other hand, I propose that we refer to scholarship describing how social actors spread their esteem, respect, or deference more or less unequally over a population of others—that is, to research defining status hierarchies “from the sender’s perspective”—as studying *status hierarchies* indeed.

These two distinct streaks in the study of status hierarchies, loosely defined, have an important trait in common: they center their analyses on the properties of whole social systems, rather than on the attributes, positions, or outcomes of individual actors within these systems. In that respect, and if they needed to be bound together under a common label, they might be accurately referred to as studying *status systems*. Yet beyond their shared commitment to the analysis of system-level properties, the two streaks are quite profoundly different. The rest of this article strives to chart this difference by mapping the distinctive ways in which they address a couple of basic questions in the study of status systems. These questions are, first, “what do status systems look like?” and, second, “where do they come from?” As I examine how the two approaches have gone differently about asking and answering these questions, I suggest that some of the most vibrant developments in recent

research have come from the analysis of *status hierarchies* in the strong sense I give to this term—that is, of how individual actors perceive differences in value or worthiness among others. Before I get to these developments, however, I shall outline in greater detail the two camps I have described as cohabiting under the big tent that is the study of status systems.

Status inequality and status hierarchies

For a long sociological tradition, historically rooted in sociometry (Moreno, 1953) and small group research (Bales *et al.*, 1951; Newcomb, 1961; Coleman, 1961; Hare, Borgatta & Bales, 1966; Sherif, 1967), status is best understood as the sum of the myriad displays of respect or deference actors receive from others in everyday interaction (Whyte, 1943; Shils, 1968; Goode, 1978; Ridgeway, 1984; Munroe, 2007). On this behaviorist reading of status (Homans, 1961), status hierarchies are usually conceived as one-dimensional rankings of individuals based on the quantity of displays of deference they amass from all others in social life (Sauder, Lynn & Podolny, 2012: 268; Manzo & Baldassarri, 2015: 329). Status hierarchies, that is, are essentially status distributions, and as such they are not vastly different from wealth or power distributions: they capture how different actors are unequally endowed with a given social asset—the only twist, in the case of status, being that this asset is attributed by others. In fact, I shall here propose that what most scholars in this tradition focus on when they say they focus on status hierarchies can be more accurately described as *status inequality*, or the overall and often unequal distribution of status across individuals resulting from the aggregation of the various deference attributions they receive from others (Accominotti, Lynn & Sauder, 2022: 87–88).

Status inequality thus defined is essentially a *structural* phenomenon: as the distribution of a distinct resource over a population of actors, it exists out there in the world, and while it may not fully come into focus until a sociologist measures it, it nonetheless has a certain degree of objectivity to it. At the same time, attributions of esteem, respect, or deference among actors are hard to observe systematically in real social settings, and therefore status inequality is difficult to objectivize. In recent decades, research on status inequality has typically overcome this hurdle by examining networks of observable exchange relations between the individuals or organizations that make up a social system (Podolny, 2001, 2005). Such

exchange relations, this research posits, can often be regarded as displays of deference or “gestures of approval” from one actor to the next (Gould, 2002: 1147; Sauder, Lynn & Podolny, 2012: 273). Beth Benjamin and Joel Podolny (1999), for example, examine the California wine industry as a status system by mapping how wineries in different locality-based appellations purchase grapes from one another: when a winery in appellation A buys from one in appellation B, appellation A shows deference to appellation B. In a similar vein, Val Burris (2004) measures status attributions in the academic system by mapping flows of PhD graduates across academic departments: when department A hires a graduate from department B, A defers to B. By tallying the amounts of deference each department or appellation draws from all others, it becomes possible to describe how the overall amount of deference in the system is distributed among its members: not just who has more and who has less, but precisely how much anyone has and how it compares to the deference received by others. In short, it becomes possible to describe inequality in the total amount of esteem, respect, or deference received by various actors, just like it is possible to describe inequality in the income they earn or the wealth they possess.¹

This vision of status hierarchies as inequality in the esteem received by various actors can be usefully contrasted with a different one, stemming from the second understanding of status disparities I outlined earlier—that is, as disparities in the amount of respect, esteem, or deference the same individual directs to different others. This alternative view, which is more directly indebted to Max Weber’s elaboration of the category of status (Weber, 1968: 932–939), considers that if status is the value people perceive in others, then status hierarchies should be defined as sets of relations of value superiority, equality, and inferiority people perceive among others (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007: 514; Freeland & Hoey, 2018; Goldthorpe, 2021; Accominotti, Lynn & Sauder, 2022: 87). Status hierarchies in this second sense, that is, are relations of unequal

1. There are applications of this network approach to the measurement of status inequality among people in small groups (see Gould, 2002; Lynn, Podolny & Tao, 2009; and Manzo & Baldassarri, 2015), among biotechnology companies (see Stuart, Hoang & Hybels, 1999), among firms in the semiconductor industry (see Podolny, Stuart & Hannan, 1996; Stuart, 1998). In technical terms, an actor’s status is sometimes measured as their indegree centrality in the directed network of deference relations (e.g., Stuart, 1998; Gould, 2002; Lynn, Podolny & Tao, 2009): this merely sums all deference ties received by the actor in question. More frequently, an actor’s status is measured as their Bonacich’s power centrality in the deference network (Bonacich, 1987): on that second approach, the deference an actor receives from any other is itself weighted by the deference this other receives from others, reflecting the idea that deference is more valuable when it comes from higher status others (e.g., Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Podolny, 2001; Burris, 2004).

worthiness we each envision among the individuals or objects surrounding us in the social world. We may have such a hierarchy in mind, for example, when we think about the relative value of various colleges or universities in a higher education system (e.g., Sauder, 2008; Espeland & Sauder, 2016). We may also be talking about a status hierarchy in this second sense when we talk about how we perceive the relative standing of various occupations. As it happens, survey research looking to elicit occupational status hierarchies typically asks respondents to position various occupations relative to one another on a vertical axis measuring their social standing (e.g., Hodge, Siegel & Rossi, 1964; Coleman, Rainwater & McClelland, 1978; Nakao & Treas, 1990; Smith & Son, 2014): there could be no better illustration that this research views occupational status hierarchies as individual understandings of the relationships of superiority, equality, and inferiority that exist among occupations.²

On this second definition, then, status hierarchies exist in people's minds: they are distinctly *cultural* phenomena. More specifically, they might be described as a subset of cultural schemas (DiMaggio, 1997; Hunzaker & Valentino, 2019; Boutyline & Soter, 2021) that record people's subjective and often vertical classification of others by degree of perceived value (Schwartz, 1981). This is not to say that these schemas cannot make their way into the world as tangible objects: a published ranking, for example, is such a cultural schema—a ranking firm's vision of the relationships of superiority, equality, or inferiority among various entities—turned into a piece of objectified culture for everyone to see. Nor does it preclude status hierarchies in this cultural sense from being shared by multiple individuals. In fact, a prime example of status hierarchies as cultural schemas is provided by what status characteristics theory refers to as “status beliefs,” and which one can define as widely held cultural beliefs about the relative competence of individuals hailing from different demographic groups—e.g., “men are more competent than women,” or “Whites are more hard working than Blacks” (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Ridgeway, 2011, 2019).

Seen in this light, it feels apt to refer to studies of status hierarchies in this second sense as studies of *status hierarchies* indeed: in contrast to approaches centering disparities in received displays of

2. On the other hand, the occupational hierarchy obtained by averaging, for each occupation, the status position they were placed in by different survey respondents (e.g., Blau & Duncan, 1967; Treiman, 1977; Coleman, Rainwater & McClelland, 1978), is a status hierarchy in the first sense I outlined above: it is a researcher-generated description of inequality in the total amount of value attributions various occupations receive from all respondents in a surveyed population.

deference, students of status hierarchies in this sense make peoples' mental orderings of individuals, groups, or things by degree of greater or lesser value the core object of their analyses. In the remainder of this article, I therefore reserve the term "status hierarchies" for the object of precisely these approaches, and I refer to studies examining disparities in the deference or esteem various actors receive from all others—or any ranking based on these disparities—as studies of "status inequality."

Of course, there are logical and empirical connections between status inequality and status hierarchies, and it has been a longstanding item on the agenda of status researchers to trace the links between the two. In particular, status hierarchies in the cultural sense have long been regarded as matrices people draw from when making attributions of esteem or deference, and therefore as being to some extent "expressed" (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007: 514) in status inequality (e.g., Homans, 1961; Berger *et al.*, 1977; Goode, 1978). As I point out in the next section, however, recent work looking at status hierarchies directly complicates this view by highlighting the considerable extent to which, outside of task-oriented small groups, these hierarchies vary across individuals and across social groups (e.g., Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Lynn & Ellerbach, 2017). Different people, that is, attribute value and relative value to others very differently, with the implication that status inequality, or a ranking of social actors based on the aggregate amount of esteem they receive from all others, is unlikely to be the straightforward expression of any individually held status hierarchy. Conversely, scholars have wondered whether and to what extent status hierarchies, as systems of relations of superiority and inferiority actors perceive among others, reflect observed patterns of inequality in the esteem these others receive in daily interaction (e.g., Ridgeway *et al.*, 1998). Yet as I shall show below, their conclusion has generally been that these patterns are rarely clear-cut enough to sustain the elaborate classifications actors have in mind when they value others relative to one another. Status hierarchies, in other words, likely emerge from more than the mere observation of status inequality.

Distinguishing between studies of status inequality and status hierarchies, therefore, is not only important because the two examine analytically and ontologically distinct objects (as I have argued so far), but also because clarifying what they each teach us about their object can help us better explain the non-straightforward ties between these objects. The following sections show how these two bodies of scholarship contribute distinct and sometimes complementary insights to our understanding of status systems by discussing how they address two basic questions: the first question

concerns the structure of status systems; the second is that of their origins.³

The structure of status inequality and status hierarchies

Unsurprisingly, studies centering status inequality tend to focus on one dimension of the structure of status systems, namely the level of inequality they exhibit in how status rewards are distributed among their members. In particular, scholars have been intrigued by the “winner-take-all” character of many status systems, or by the fact that in them the vast majority of status attributions are directed to a vanishingly small number of individuals (e.g., Frank & Cook, 1995; Gould, 2002; English, 2005; Menger, 2014; Fortunato *et al.*, 2018). This concentration of status in the hands of a few, research shows, seldom seems to be explained by matching levels of inequality in the distribution of ability, skill, or talent—in short, of the underlying qualities status attributions should reward—among the actors of winner-take-all status systems (Merton, 1968; Zuckerman, 1977; Menger, 2014). This phenomenon, which Freda Lynn, Joel Podolny and Lin Tao (2009: 761) refer to as “status dispersion,” raises the deeper, normative issue of the fairness of highly unequal status distributions. An empirical domain in which such dispersion has received considerable attention is the creative economy, in which a few “superstar” winners often reap most of the status benefits in their field despite not having a clear claim to them from the sheer superiority of their talent (Rosen, 1981; Adler, 1985; Menger, 1999, 2014; Alper & Wassall, 2006; Salganik, Dodds & Watts, 2006).

Studies of status hierarchies approach the structure of status systems from a fundamentally different perspective: rather than patterns of inequality in received status, they explore the structure of actors’ mental maps for sorting others by degree of greater or lesser worthiness. This broad endeavor covers at least three distinct questions. First, scholarship on status hierarchies looks to uncover the *content* of these mental maps, or in other words to reveal who occupies what position within them. Within the U.S. context, for example, a key question has been that of how individuals rank racial and ethnic groups, and in particular of how the line between racial groups has been redrawn as American society evolved from a primarily biracial to a multiracial one following the influx of Hispanic

3. I have explored how the two bodies of scholarship go differently about addressing a third question—“what are the consequences of status systems?”—in a different article coauthored with Freda Lynn and Michael Sauder (Accominotti, Lynn & Sauder, 2022).

and Asian immigrants over the past half-century (Lin & Lundquist, 2013: 190). In that context, is the divide in the U.S. racial hierarchy today between Whites and racialized others (Blauner, 2001)? Is it between Blacks and non-Blacks (Feagin, 2000)? Or does the hierarchy assume a tripartite structure, with Whites at the top, Asian and Hispanic Americans in the middle, and Blacks at the bottom (Bonilla-Silva, 2004)?

Second, status hierarchies can be described for their overall *shape*, or for a series of architectural features which characterize any hierarchy but whose expression can vary from one hierarchy to the next. Fabien Accominotti, Freda Lynn and Michael Sauder (2022) thus identify three major dimensions of the “architecture of status hierarchies.” Their greater or lesser verticality, first, describes the depth of the status distinctions they rest upon, with more vertical hierarchies displaying more differentiation in status positions, as in a full-fledged ranking (Sauder, 2006) or a finely grained caste system (Ambedkar, 1989), and more horizontal hierarchies involving rougher distinctions between broad groups of high- versus low-status actors, as between Ivy League and non-Ivy League colleges. Status hierarchies’ greater or lesser clarity, second, hinges on the degree of certainty people have about the status distance between any two of the hierarchy’s units: hierarchies are clearer, in particular, when they are produced by evaluative devices that dissipate ambiguity about the value and relative value of the their constituent elements (Accominotti, 2021a); on the other hand, they tend to be blurrier when multiple arbiters of value disagree about the worth and relative worth of actors in a social system (Sauder & Espeland, 2006; Brandtner, 2017), or when these actors can be sorted based on multiple, discordant evaluation criteria (Lenski, 1954; Abbott, 1981; Gould, 2003). Finally, Fabien Accominotti and colleagues show that status hierarchies can be more or less rigid, depending on the degree of stability of their value orderings over time.

A focus on the content and shape of status hierarchies finally raises the question of their *shared character*: if status hierarchies are mental maps encapsulating the relations of superiority, equality, and inferiority individuals perceive among others, to what extent do the maps held by different actors resemble one another? Recent research examining this question insists on how much, outside of small, task-oriented groups that need to agree on a hierarchy to interact efficiently, status hierarchies vary, both across individuals and across social groups. In a series of analyses of individual responses to a General Social Survey item measuring people’s perceptions of the occupational prestige hierarchy, for example, Freda Lynn and

George Ellerbach (2017) and Lauren Valentino (2021, 2022) show that respondents differ widely in how they envision this hierarchy, and that these differences are particularly pronounced among respondents who themselves occupy lower positions in the occupational hierarchy.⁴ In a similar vein, Ken-Hou Lin and Jennifer Lundquist's (2013) study of racial preferences in online mate selection finds that U.S. women and men vary in how they perceive the racial hierarchy among potential partners of the opposite gender: whereas women tend to envision this hierarchy as a tripartite system in which White men are at the top, Asian and Hispanic men in the middle, and Black men at the bottom, men's perceived racial hierarchy is more likely to be a binary one, with non-Black women at the top and Black women at the bottom.

The origins of status inequality and status hierarchies

With winner-take-all status systems such a central focus of status inequality research, a lot of this research's efforts have gone toward understanding the origins of highly skewed status distributions. One explanation for extreme levels of status inequality, and more profoundly for the discrepancy between extreme levels of status inequality and comparatively moderate inequality in the distribution of quality, skill, or talent among the actors of a social system, is that the mapping from quality to status is "convex" (Rosen, 1981: 846). On this account, tiny upticks in quality at the top of the quality distribution procure disproportionate increases in enjoyment or utility to the individuals experiencing these upticks—for example because there are unique psychological rewards to enjoying a performance one knows is "the best." As a consequence, a disproportionate share of value attributions should be received by actors at the top of the quality distribution, leading to winner-take-all patterns of status inequality.

By far the most common—and empirically supported—explanation for highly skewed status distributions, however, involves mechanisms of cumulative advantage unfolding over time, also known as "Matthew effects" (Merton, 1968, 1988; Adler, 1985; Gould, 2002; Salganik, Dodds & Watts, 2006; Bothner *et al.*, 2010; Van de Rijt *et al.*, 2014; Menger, 2014; for a broader review on

4. Earlier work on the United States already noted "the lack of any clear public consensus" (Coleman, Rainwater & McClelland, 1978: 120) about the shape of the status structure among Americans, yet this work was less interested in mapping out systematic variations in people's perceptions of the status hierarchy than in constructing "a single picture that [was] the summation of public impression" about that hierarchy (*ibid.*).

cumulative advantage as a mechanism for inequality, see DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). On this explanation, small differences in ability or quality between actors generate equally small differences in the status attributions they receive early on in the history of a social system. Yet because status attributions themselves often serve as proxies for ability or quality, over time early status attributions beget further status attributions, and differences in received status snowball even though underlying differences in ability or quality remain constant.

Over the past two decades, a series of mathematical and computational contributions have formalized and nuanced the key intuition behind this account of winner-take-all status distributions. Roger V. Gould's (2002) classic article on the origins of status inequality in small groups thus proposes a rich, game theoretical model of deference or esteem attributions, the predictions of which it tests against the patterns of status attributions observed in three different datasets: Robert F. Bales' (1970) study of verbal communication in task groups of various sizes, William Blatz and colleagues' (1937) study of interactions among the Dionne quintuplets, and Theodore Newcomb's (1961) classic longitudinal study of a residential fraternity. Gould's model posits that people's attributions of esteem arise from the combination of three basic logics: people are more likely to value others they see as more able or talented; they emulate their peers' esteem attributions when making their own, along the lines predicted by the cumulative advantage argument; and finally, in a defining feature of Gould's model, people are worse off when their esteem attributions are not reciprocated. By validating this model with small-group status allocation data, Gould shows that in real world settings, cumulative advantage processes are indeed responsible for the decoupling of status inequality from underlying differences in quality across actors. Yet he also explains why empirically observed status distributions are seldom entirely winner-take-all: actors' concern for symmetry means that they direct a sizeable amount of their esteem to others who are less popular, but whom they expect to reciprocate. Subsequent work has used agent-based simulations to critique Gould's model and make it more realistic (Manzo & Baldassarri, 2015) or to explore the conditions under which it generates, not just status differences that are disproportionate to underlying gaps in quality, but a radical misalignment between the status—and quality—based orderings of individuals in a social system (Lynn, Podolny & Tao, 2009).

Perhaps nowhere does the analytical distinction between status inequality and status hierarchies produce as different a set of insights

as in response to the question of their origins. In contrast to status inequality scholarship, research on the origins of status hierarchies examines the formation of people's cultural schemas for sorting others by degree of greater or lesser perceived worthiness. There are two broad ways the literature has addressed this generic question:

1. The first seeks to understand the historical origins of widely held cultural schemas about the relative value of different people or different groups—such as schemas about the relative value of actors with unequal levels of competence, empathy, or cultivation, for example. While scholars here agree that these schemas tend to reflect the shared values of a group or society (Lamont, 2012; Ridgeway, 2019), they offer competing accounts of where they first came from. Some note that higher positions in status hierarchies often reward traits—such as competence or altruism—that make their holders more likely to contribute positively to a group's valued goals (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Anderson & Willer, 2014). This suggests that status hierarchies may have emerged from evolutionary processes, either as devices for rewarding pro-social behavior in situations of interdependence that are characteristic of human action (Simpson, Willer & Ridgeway, 2012; Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Van Vugt & Tybur, 2015; Ridgeway, 2019), or as “information goods” directing the “social learners” in a group toward types of behavior they should want to emulate (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001: 173).

Others, however, advance a more cynical explanation for the historical emergence of collective beliefs in the unequal worthiness of various social actors. Following in Max Weber's (1968 [1922]) footsteps, they observe that after securing control of a material resource, dominant social groups often look to cement their economic or political advantage by fostering collective beliefs in their superior worth. Status hierarchies, in this view, are created by dominant groups to blunt challenges to their positions of privilege. In contemporary social theory, this argument is most recognizable in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2019; see also Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Tilly, 1998), who maintains in particular that widespread beliefs in a hierarchy of cultural tastes work to stabilize structures of material inequality by sanctioning the superior worth of the materially dominant. Putting this argument to the test, recent empirical work on the emergence of cultural hierarchy as a dimension of social status in the late nineteenth-century United States shows that upper-class groups were in fact heavily involved in forging that hierarchy, but that the public endorsement of upper-class tastes by middle-class groups was instrumental in establishing

the hierarchy's broader social legitimacy (Accominotti, Khan & Storer, 2018; see also DiMaggio, 1982; Levine, 1988).⁵

2. The second way of asking about the origins of status hierarchies consists in examining how individual actors come to associate different degrees of worth with different others. Social psychological research in the status construction tradition has explored this question head-on through experimental work with small, task-oriented groups (e.g., Ridgeway *et al.*, 1998, 2009; Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000) and it highlights the role of two combined factors: first, it shows that when presented with evidence of unequal control over an important resource between two, arbitrarily delineated social groups, people in *both* the resource-rich and resource-poor groups tend to form beliefs in the superior competence or worthiness of those in the resource-rich group—beliefs that, moreover, they are likely to carry over in later encounters with other members of the same groups (Markovsky, Smith & Berger, 1984; Markovsky, 1988). Second, however, this effect only arises when subjects in the two groups interact, for example in the context of a problem-solving task wherein resource disparities are likely to translate into deferential gestures from resource-poor to resource-rich actors. This means that mere cognitive exposure to resource differences between groups is not enough to induce hierarchical beliefs about the relative value of their members, and that these beliefs also emerge from the observation of unequal patterns of deference attribution between the two groups.

These findings speak directly to a central question at the intersection of research on status inequality and status hierarchies: to what extent do actors' understandings of the relations of superiority, equality, and inferiority among others arise from their observation of patterns of inequality in the deference or esteem these others receive in everyday interaction? A further question would ask *how exactly* patterns of inequality in deference attributions enter the formation of individually held status hierarchies: do these hierarchies merely track inequality in the accumulated gestures of deference received by various actors, as approached for example through the measures of network centrality I discussed earlier? Or do they reflect more complex structural patterns, such as "link chain" systems of ordered tiers or leagues that often emerge in deference networks (e.g., Dumont, 1967; Marriott, 1968), and that network analysts have typically mapped using blockmodeling or multidimensional

5. In line with this account, Austin C. Kozlowski, Matt Taddy and James A. Evans (2019) show that in the early decades of the twentieth century, perceptions of greater or lesser cultivation became tightly associated with perceptions of social class in the eyes of Americans.

scaling techniques (e.g., Anheier, Gerhards & Romo, 1995; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Accominotti, 2008)?⁶

Status construction theory's answer to these questions suggests that in small, task-oriented settings, patterns of deference attribution alone can generate beliefs in the unequal worth of two groups even in the absence of resource disparities between them. In later work, though, Cecilia Ridgeway (2019) expands on Ivan Chase's account of the fundamental instability of dominance hierarchies in animal societies (Chase *et al.*, 2002; Chase & Seitz, 2011; Chase & Lindquist, 2016) to argue that in large human settings involving many overlapping groups, resource differences and associated patterns of deference attribution are unlikely to sustain the kind of predictable interactional hierarchies that might impress themselves onto people's minds as clear-cut status hierarchies. This in turn creates the opportunity for broader, historically emerged cultural schemas to step in and organize individuals' perceptions of the unequal worth of others. As I shall outline in closing, understanding how these schemas are acquired has been the focus of some of the most vibrant developments in recent research on status systems.

Conclusion: Institutions and the individual acquisition of status hierarchies

If status hierarchies primarily come to individuals in the form of preexisting cultural schemas that they pick up and make their own, the question arises of how this picking-up happens. In recent years, a body of work recognizing the learned character of status hierarchies has addressed this question by highlighting the power of institutions and cultural objects in shaping actors' understanding of the unequal worth of people, groups, or things around them. One first version of this approach shows how specific institutions directly inform the content and shape of status hierarchies. Exploring the formation of individual perceptions of the occupational prestige hierarchy, John Levi Martin (2000) thus makes the case that actors do not arrive at this hierarchy as full-fledged adults observing intricate patterns of resource disparities or deference attributions across occupational groups. Rather, powerful cultural objects such as illustrated children books *teach* them the hierarchy early on, in simplified but easily absorbable totemic language (Durkheim, 1965 [1912])

6. For an investigation of how patterns of transitive closure in dominance networks (Chase, 1980) may telegraph status hierarchies —and evidence that this does not seem to be the case empirically (see Papachristos, Hureau & Braga, 2013).

that lets them know “what *kinds* of people do what *kinds* of things” (Martin, 2000: 223), therefore organizes their later experience of occupations in ways that confirm the learned hierarchy. Reinforcing the point that institutions matter for the acquisition of occupational status schemas, Freda Lynn and George Ellerbach (2017) demonstrate that in the U.S., individuals who attended college typically develop a different “cognitive prism” for envisioning the occupational prestige hierarchy than those who did not: while the former sort occupations that require a college education into a unified category which they place clearly atop all others in the hierarchy, those without a college degree make more gradual and less predictable distinctions between what they perceive as better and worse occupations.

In a second and stronger version of this approach, ongoing research finally suggests that certain objects and institutions do not just inculcate actors with domain-specific status hierarchies, but also teach them a more generic “hierarchical gaze” (Accominotti, 2021b: 200)—a transportable disposition to perceive differences among social entities in hierarchical or “ordinal” terms (Fourcade, 2016; Fourcade & Healy, 2024). In experimental work, Fabien Accominotti and Daniel Tadmon (2020) thus show that evaluative tools that artificially clarify performance hierarchies—such as numerical ratings—make observers more willing to reward unequal performances unequally, and that this happens because these tools make observers more accepting of the idea that performance is hierarchical. While more work would be needed to measure how various institutions contribute to actors’ acquisition of such a hierarchical gaze, this scholarship illustrates why an interest in the construction of status hierarchies matters: at bottom, our willingness to view different people as unequally worthy is what sustains our acceptance of inequality between them.

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