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

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-

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
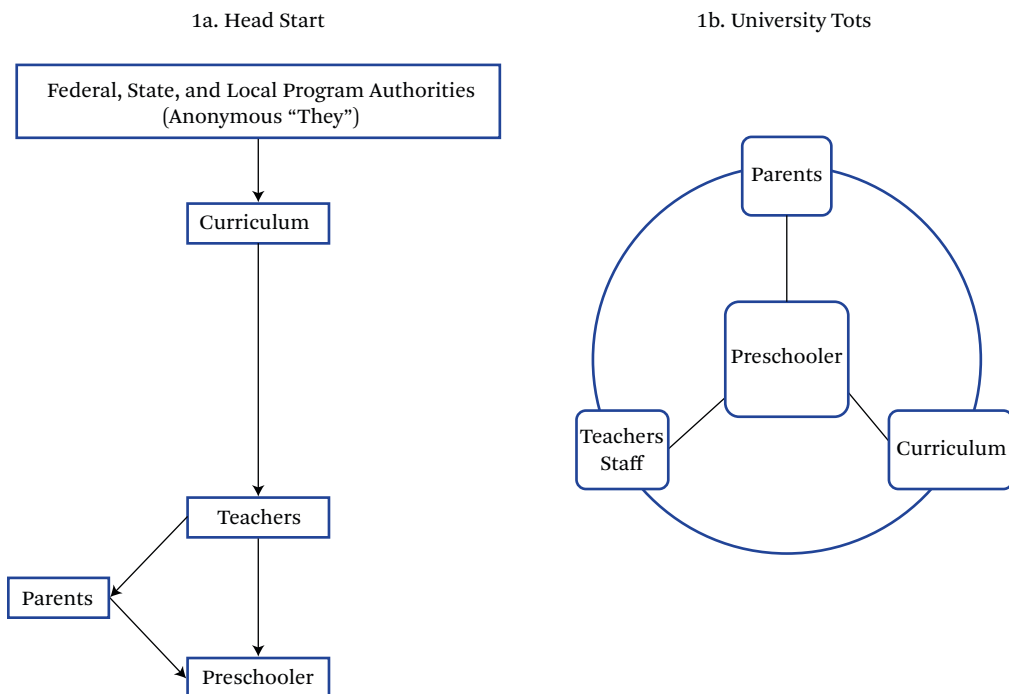
Source: Espy and Lynn 2021.

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

2a. Before *U.S. News* Rankings   2b. After *U.S. News* Rankings
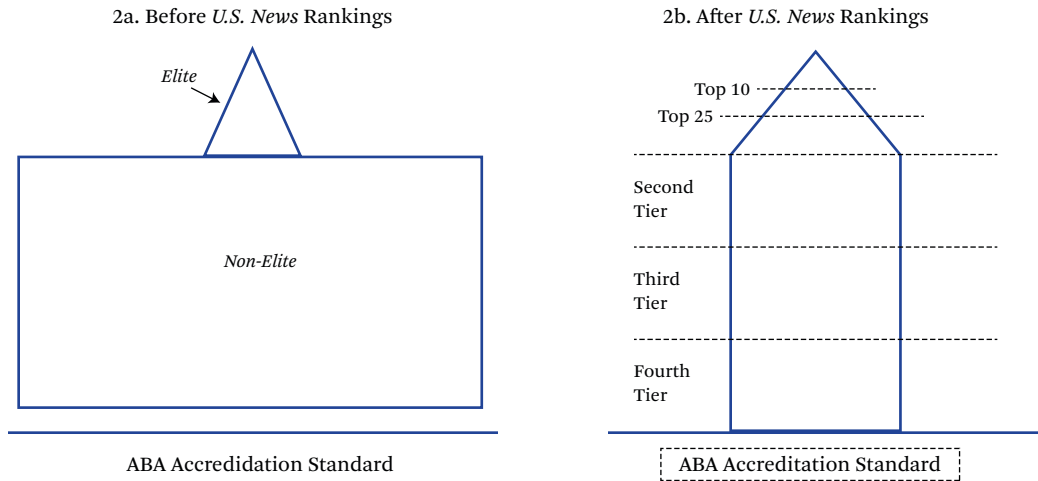
Source: Sauder 2006. Reprinted by permission of Springer Nature.

(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

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
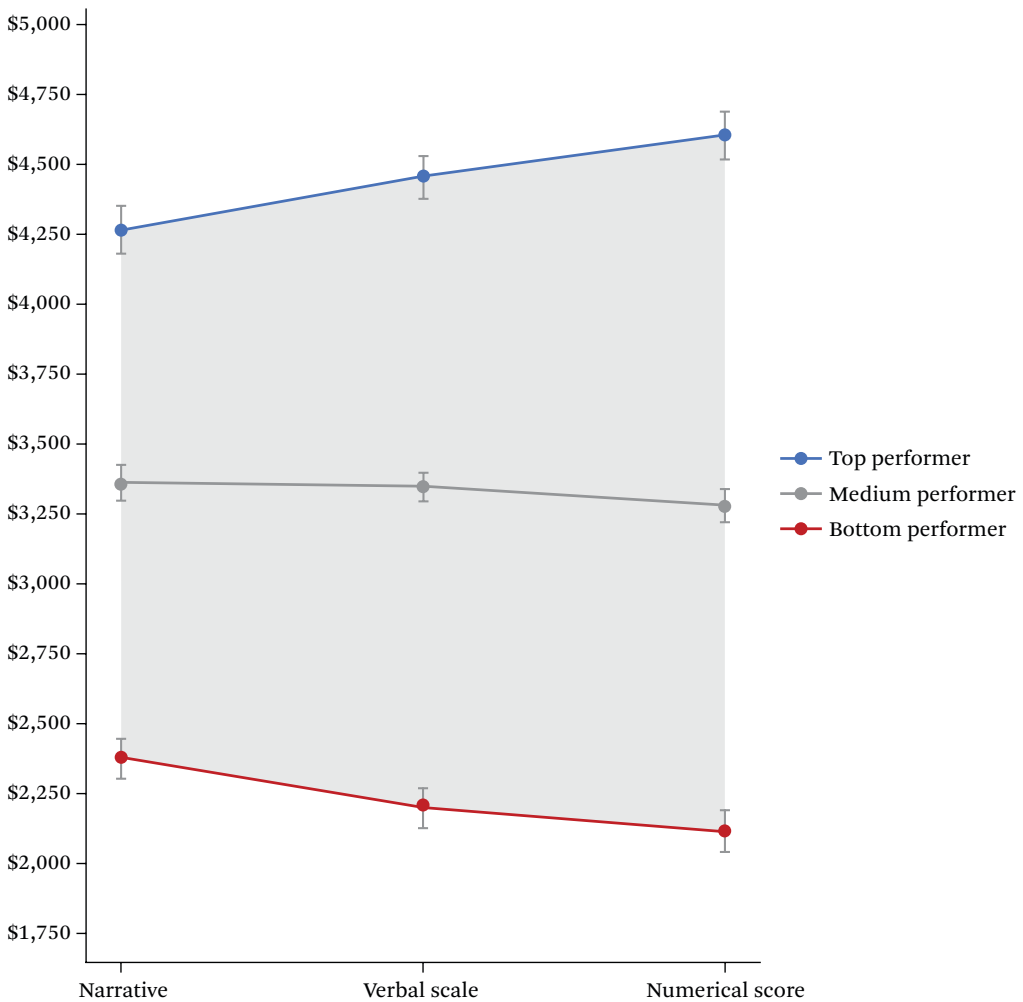
Source: Accominotti and Tadmon 2020.

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-

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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