

Is Misrecognition Recognised? Classed Perceptions of Occupational Status

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journals.sagepub.com/home/soc**Håvard Helland** 

Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Sam Friedman 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Vegard Jarness 

InFact AS, Norway

Jørn Ljunggren 

NOVA, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Abstract

Sociological work commonly assumes that people across the class hierarchy tacitly accept, or misrecognise, an occupational status hierarchy. In this article we interrogate this drawing on unique nationally representative Norwegian survey data (N = 4235). We find that people in all class positions do indeed perceive a clear occupational status hierarchy, although working-class respondents attribute higher average status scores to working-class occupations. Significantly, this status order is maintained even when respondents assess the status occupations *ought to have* – albeit with a significantly more compressed status hierarchy. Finally, we find little evidence that those in different class positions use different criteria to evaluate status. These results indicate that people do not dispute existing status hierarchies, or even their normative basis, even when this positions them lower in terms of social esteem. We argue this provides support for Bourdieu's assertion that class domination occurs via a 'doxic naturalisation' of the status order.

Keywords

Bourdieu, cultural class analysis, misrecognition, Norway, occupational status, social class

Corresponding author:

Håvard Helland, Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, PO box 4, St Olavs plass, Oslo 0130, Norway.

Email: havhel@oslomet.no

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic a string of politicians, journalists and scholars asserted that a fundamental public re-evaluation of occupational status was taking place. The pandemic, these accounts posited, had revealed to people the true value of different forms of work, with the pivotal societal importance of ‘frontline’ health, retail and care work finally recognised (Kramer and Kramer, 2020). In many European countries, the most emblematic example of this was a public applause for frontline workers carried out each week during lockdown (Hurst, 2020). This very public form of recognition indicated, for some, a sea change in the way we valorise traditionally marginalised occupations (BBC, 2020). At the same time many were sceptical of whether such fleeting expressions of collective feeling constituted a meaningful re-evaluation of traditional prestige hierarchies (Wood and Skeggs, 2020). But even more than this, the status re-evaluation narrative relied on a pretty large presupposition. It assumed that, pre-COVID, there was a clear occupational status order that was both widely agreed upon and seen as normatively just, regardless of one’s own social position.

In fact, this assumption is key to much contemporary sociology, including work connecting status orders to group solidarity and social closure (Lynn et al., 2024), research using occupational status to measure wider socio-economic status (SES) (Lynn and Ellerbach, 2017) and studies disentangling concepts of class and status (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2010). Here we are particularly concerned with the way this assumption structures the different strands within Bourdieu-inspired cultural class analysis. Such scholarship tends to proceed from the theoretical assumption that the social esteem and status associated with certain workplace competencies and skills, and associated occupations, are fundamentally ‘misrecognised’ in society, meaning that power relations are not seen ‘for what they objectively are’, but in a form ‘which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: xxii). In terms of work, this means that the dispositions and embodied behaviours inculcated via a privileged upbringing are widely misread as signals of skill or merit, meaning both that those from privileged backgrounds carry an advantage in doing such work, but also that the work itself is misrecognised as more prestigious or valuable (Ashley, 2022; Ingram and Allen, 2019). Bourdieu (1989) was keen to stress that such forms of *symbolic mastery* only constitute one way of knowing the world, and therefore only have an arbitrary normative claim to value. Nonetheless, in most western societies, such forms of work are assigned high value and are accepted as legitimate even by dominated groups.

Despite the theoretical importance of misrecognition to Bourdieu-inspired cultural class analysis, and the assumption in much empirical work that it operates without contestation in terms of occupational status, we know of no work that has actually charted the connection between people’s class position and their assessments of occupational status. In this article we therefore aim to fill this gap, employing Norwegian survey data designed especially for mapping lay assessments of occupational status. In particular, we ask:

1. How do people perceive the occupational status order? Do classes and class fractions exhibit distinct perceptions?

2. How do people assess what the status of occupations ought to be? Do classes and class fractions exhibit distinct assessments and rankings?
3. What criteria do people use when they assess the status of occupations? Do classes and class fractions exhibit distinct evaluative criteria?

The Norwegian case is arguably apt for mapping such connections. Although previous research has demonstrated marked class divisions in social mobility, education, marriage patterns and lifestyles (see, for example, Flemmen et al., 2017; Helland and Wiborg, 2019; Toft and Jarness, 2020), Norway is still comparatively egalitarian due to characteristics such as a compressed wage distribution and extensive and universal welfare services (see, for example, Esping-Andersen, 2015). Egalitarian societal perceptions are also prominent (Hjellbrekke et al., 2015). The Norwegian education system is organised around the ideal of a unified ‘school for all’, where there are no private elite schools; primary school districts are defined geographically; tuition fees for private schools are strictly capped and regulated by law; and the tracking of students does not occur before the age of 16 (Imsen and Volckmar, 2014). Thus, the largely institutionalised facilitation of cross-class encounters and interactions is arguably more marked in Norway than in societies in which key societal institutions are more strongly socially stratified. Given these comparatively egalitarian traits, we argue that Norway constitutes a ‘least likely’ case in terms of class differences in perceptions of occupational status. In other words, if we find that subjective perceptions of occupational status are strongly related to class even in a comparatively egalitarian country like Norway, we should expect this finding to also apply in more stratified societies

Our analysis proceeds in five steps. First, we discuss the three main sociological approaches to occupational status, and explain why in particular the relationship between class position and status evaluations are so central to Bourdieusian conceptions of misrecognition – despite being largely unexamined empirically. Second, we outline both dispute and acceptance hypotheses of the status order in cultural class analysis that flow from Bourdieusian theory, and its development via the work of Lamont. Third, we outline the contours of our survey data. Fourth, and most importantly, we discuss our results, demonstrating that people across the class structure do not dispute existing status hierarchies, or even their normative basis, even when this positions them lower in terms of social esteem. Finally, we conclude, arguing that our results provide support for Bourdieu’s assertion that class domination occurs via a ‘doxic naturalisation’ of the status order.

Approaches to Occupational Status

In contemporary stratification research, three main perspectives on occupational status divisions can be identified, all of which have stakes in the question of the existence of an occupational status order and if this is widely agreed upon and seen as normatively just, regardless of one’s own social position. First, the American sociology of stratification fuses economic, social and cultural aspects of the stratification structure, including that of occupational prestige, through the notion of SES (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Ganzeboom et al., 1992; Treiman, 1977). In fact, socio-economic status ‘is an American way of

saying “class” (Hope, 1982: 1012) and is routinely included in analyses as a variable measuring social position. Exactly how to measure SES is however contested, and there are numerous occupational scales (for an overview, see Hauser and Warren, 1997). Notwithstanding important differences between these approaches, they all share a propensity to merge class and occupational status in constructing hierarchically ordered stratification scales that are thought to reflect the primary bases for structuring social inequalities. Typically, SES is thus used in empirical analyses as an explanatory variable for various outcomes.

The second perspective is primarily associated with Chan and Goldthorpe (2004, 2010) who have aimed to reinstate a clear conceptual distinction between class and status. Chan and Goldthorpe (2010: 11) view the hierarchical status order as ‘a structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality, and inferiority among individuals’. Crucially, this hierarchy is regarded as expressed in differential association, especially in more intimate kinds of sociability, such as friendships and romantic relationships. In empirical analyses of various outcomes, class and status are thus posited as distinct independent variables with separate explananda. For example, economic security and prospects are stratified more by class than by status, while the opposite is true of cultural consumption and lifestyles. Thus, although they depart from the American sociology of stratification in viewing class and status as two distinct independent variables, they too end up precluding the analysis of whether and how class is connected to status. Specifically, they do not investigate whether and how people’s class position is connected to subjective perceptions of social status in terms of what Weber (2010: 142) called *Stände*, the ‘positive or negative social assessment of honor’.

In this article, we are primarily interested in a third perspective on class and status, which may in broad terms be called ‘cultural class analysis’ and is primarily associated with Bourdieu and his scholarly descendants (see, for example, Savage, 2003). While Bourdieu did not rely on the Weberian terminological distinction between class and status, there are several ways in which his approach invokes distinct status processes (see the discussion in Flemmen et al., 2019). In particular, and for our purposes in this article, status processes are captured by his concept of *symbolic power*. This is perhaps the closest conceptual equivalent to the Weberian notion of status honour, strictly speaking: the concept refers to the social esteem associated with certain social positions, lifestyles, practices, skills, assets. Crucially, the concept of symbolic power highlights how power relations gain efficacy through a process Bourdieu (1989) referred to as ‘misrecognition’, meaning that the possession of resources and privileges are not recognised as the true underpinning of certain outcomes. For instance, in the labour market, a number of recent studies have shown how forms of embodiment and ways of thinking and speaking associated with a privileged upbringing are misrecognised as legitimate forms of ‘merit’ or skills in high-status occupations (Ashley, 2022; Rivera, 2015). This misrecognition not only means that those from advantaged backgrounds tend to progress more easily in their careers, but it also contributes to the overall status of these occupations as environments where the most valorised forms of merit can be cashed in.

In this way, and unlike the perspectives highlighted above, Bourdieu calls attention to the way that acceptance of status hierarchies among people in *different* class positions contributes to the constitution, reproduction and legitimation of power relations.

However, although Bourdieu's theoretical-methodological approach clearly allows for investigating connections between the social space and subjective perceptions, evaluations and classifications of occupational status appear to be uncharted empirical territory in the kind of cultural class analysis that draws on Bourdieusian perspectives (e.g. Bennett et al., 2009; Prieur et al., 2008). Some recent research has shown that perceptions of the occupational status order tend to vary by educational level (Lynn and Ellerbach, 2017), race (Valentino, 2022) and gender (Lynn et al., 2024), but we know of no work looking at variation by class. In the following, we discuss how such classed assessments may be understood using a Bourdieusian theoretical approach.

Is the Status Order Disputed or Tacitly Accepted?

Most Bourdieu-inspired work assumes that domination occurs through 'doxic naturalisation', or common-sense acceptance of the status order. In this state of 'doxa', power relations are not openly discussed or challenged. Unlike coercive power, domination through doxa implies that dominant actors gain the compliance or consent of the dominated, resulting in a kind of legitimacy that it would not otherwise have.

Legitimacy here does not imply that the power relations are acknowledged, or even perceived as such, by dominant and dominated actors alike. Instead, it results from a misrecognition of the real basis of the asymmetric power relation. Dominated groups are drawn into the dominant actors' interpretive perspectives, a process that does not imply that the dominant intentionally deceive them (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1977: 168). Thus, Bourdieu (1989: 21) argues, '[I]legitimation of the social world is not, as some believe, the product of deliberate and purposive action of propaganda or symbolic imposition'. As Bourdieu argues, the absence of explicit symbolic struggles does not mean an absence of symbolic divisions; it may simply be the case that these divisions are *not* subject to overt classification struggles. It may for instance be the case that the status and recognition flowing from certain occupations – say, professors and medical doctors – are tacitly implied without being consciously considered, neither by the professors and medical doctors themselves, nor by those who in some sense 'look up to' them.

Yet it is important to note that in Bourdieu's (1977, 2018) theory of class and classification struggles, there is also another conceivable scenario whereby the legitimacy of power relations is in fact questioned and thereby challenged. In particular, once a topic is brought into the universe of discourse, people can take a stand in and through antagonistic and more or less strategic position-takings. Indeed, dominated groups and individuals have an objective interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken-for-granted by putting forward 'heterodoxic' opinions (e.g. the contention among some working-class individuals that professors are snobs who do not deserve their social esteem (Jarness and Flemmen, 2019) or that 'highbrow' comedy fans who reject laughter miss the essence of humour (Friedman, 2014)).

These two hypothetical scenarios – dispute versus tacit acceptance – guide the main expectations in our empirical analysis. In the following, we develop these expectations further in and through a short review of sociological research about class, status and classification struggles that have stakes in the question of misrecognition. It should,

however, be noted that we regard these as analytically abstracted scenarios and that it would be unreasonable to expect unconditional empirical support for either of them.

Dispute: The Role of Morals and Egalitarianism

The 'dispute' scenario is akin to what is suggested in research associated with the work of Lamont (1992, 2000) and her approach to map symbolic boundaries; that is, subjective categorisations and evaluations of people, practices, tastes, attitudes and so forth. Specifically, the Lamontian approach has been geared towards mapping empirically whether and how people classify and judge others; that is, whether and how they demarcate themselves from others and believe that 'we' are different from (or better than) 'them'.

While Lamont agrees with Bourdieu that people's perceptions, classifications and evaluations of the social world are connected to their structural class position, she goes further by emphasising that the terms and tropes people use to construct symbolic boundaries do not appear in a cultural vacuum. Both the content and the relative salience of various types of symbolic boundaries, Lamont argues, vary systematically with the discursive resources available to different social groups. In particular, Lamont's studies highlight the moral aspects of status, both as a criterion through which people judge and 'look down' on others and how people use morality as a means to challenge others seen as 'above' themselves in social hierarchies.

Especially pertinent for our purposes is the analysis of symbolic boundary drawing among working-class men in France and the United States, where Lamont (2000) has demonstrated that moral standards can function as an alternative to economic definitions of success, thereby offering the working class a way to maintain dignity and make sense of their lives. Crucially, her working-class interviewees de-emphasise socio-economic and cultural hierarchies and place much more emphasis on moral value when classifying and evaluating others. They thus situate themselves above, or at least side by side with, the upper classes according to a moral hierarchy. Thus, Lamont argues, symbolically dominated groups attempt to contest the status of symbolically dominant groups, while simultaneously attempting to establish alternative criteria for social esteem.

In relation to our research questions listed above, three main expectations can be developed from this line of argument. First, subjective perceptions across the class structure of how 'most people' assess various occupations will reflect an awareness of established occupational status hierarchies but, second, subjective stances about the 'ideal' status occupations *ought to have* will vary systematically according to respondents' class position. Specifically, respondents located in the lower regions of the class structure will be distinctive in their views: they will 'upend' the status hierarchy by placing traditional low-status occupations on a higher status level. Third, subjective stances regarding *criteria* for evaluating occupational status will also vary significantly by class position, with respondents in lower regions putting an emphasis on honesty and high moral standards.

Tacit Acceptance: The Role of Doxic Naturalisation and Misrecognition

The second hypothetical scenario derived from Bourdieu's theory of classification struggles involves a 'doxic' or commonsensical acceptance of social hierarchies. This

hypothesis is motivated by turning to more recent studies of class, status divisions and symbolic boundaries. On the one hand, previous survey-based research about class and cultural divisions suggests that the structure of the social space – that is, the dimensions of capital volume and capital composition – correspond systematically to divisions in lifestyles, and moral-political sentiments (see, for example, Flemmen et al., 2019; Prieur et al., 2008). However, qualitative inquiries into self-identities and symbolic demarcations suggest that such divisions do not translate directly to antagonistic classification struggles between classes. For instance, it has been shown that people located in the upper regions of social space are strikingly aware that others may perceive them as ‘snobbish’ and ‘elitist’ and that they tend to downplay difference in cross-class encounters to appear ‘ordinary’ and ‘down-to-earth’ (Jarness and Friedman, 2017; Ljunggren, 2017; Reeves and Friedman, 2024; Vassenden and Jonvik, 2019).

Studies of boundary drawing among those located in the lower regions of social space indicate that such strategies work quite well (Jarness and Flemmen, 2019; see also Harrits and Pedersen, 2018). Although working-class respondents mobilise moral sentiments to challenge the legitimacy of certain types of ‘snobbish’ and ‘flashy’ people in higher class positions, they are primarily concerned with *explicit displays* of status hierarchies – disparaging those individuals who are seen as showing signs of ‘snobbish’ attitudes, while accepting those whom they perceive as ‘ordinary’ or ‘down-to-earth’.

As regards our research questions, three main expectations can be developed also from this line of argument. The first expectation is similar to the ‘dispute scenario’ discussed above: subjective perceptions of how ‘most people’ evaluate various occupations will not vary significantly by class position but, second, people’s subjective stances about the ‘ideal’ level of status occupations ought to have will largely resemble how ‘most people’ evaluate occupations. This expectation is based on the premise that: (1) anti-elitist egalitarian sentiments are strictly directed against specific individuals exhibiting ‘snobbishness’ and explicit displays of status hierarchies; (2) subjective aversion to such displays are not generalised to specific occupations; and (3) that the esteem of those in typical high-status occupations who do not breach egalitarian codes of conduct are tacitly accepted.

Third, subjective stances regarding the importance of criteria for evaluating occupational status will vary significantly according to class position, with those in lower regions again distinct in their emphasis on honesty and high moral standards.

Methodology

We use data from the ‘ProTruSt: Status and trust in occupational groups’ survey¹ distributed to a representative sample of the Norwegian adult population aged 18 to 80 (N = 4235, response rate: 33%). The questionnaire was developed by the research team at the Centre for the Study of Professions at Oslo Metropolitan University, inter alia to measure the questions raised in this article. In order to secure representative data, the data were collected from the Gallup Panel through online questionnaires in September and October 2022.² The survey provides information about the Norwegian population’s assessment of the social status of 32 occupations (see Figure 1) and their views about the importance of

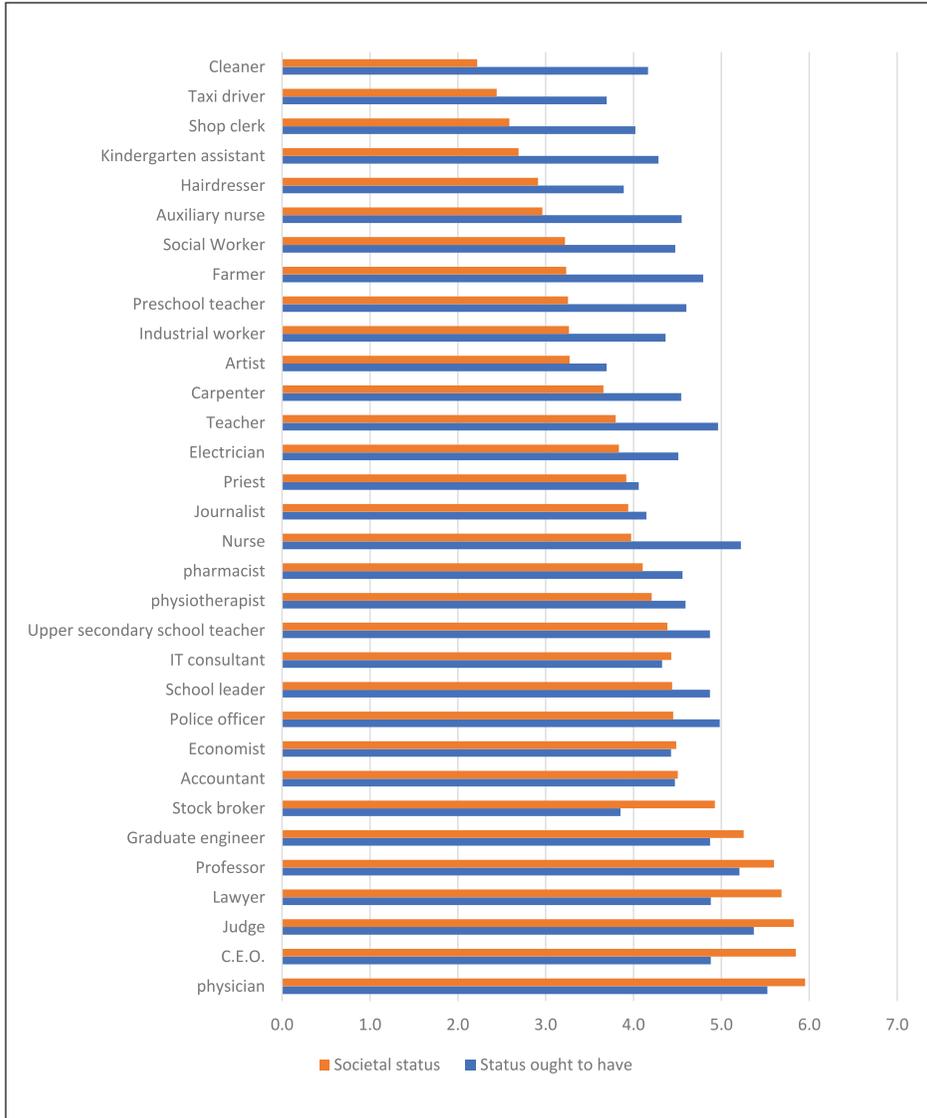


Figure 1. Means on the questions: What status will most people give the occupations? and What social status do you think the occupations ought to have?

various criteria for evaluating occupational status (e.g. level of income, education, influence and moral standards).

Dependent Variables

We examine three main dependent variables. The first is based on respondents' evaluation of the 32 occupations listed in Figure 1. Specifically, respondents were asked:

‘Different occupations have different status. Here is a scale ranging from 1, denoting lowest status, to 7, denoting highest status. How do you think most people will consider the status of the occupation?’ In order to simplify the presentation, we have constructed four indexes. The indexes are mainly constructed on the basis of the occupations’ required level of education.³ The reliability of these indexes is quite good, measured by Cronbach’s alpha, and they make good sociological sense. One group consists of highly educated elite professionals (i.e. physician, judge, professor, lawyer, graduate engineer, chief executive officer (CEO), economist and stock broker). Their average status is 5.4 and Cronbach’s alpha for this index is 0.86. The next group of occupations normally require BA-level education, and include physiotherapist, journalist, teacher, police officer, social worker, nurse, IT consultant, accountant and pre-school teacher. The average status for these occupations is 4.0 and Cronbach’s alpha is 0.81. The last two groups are working-class occupations but distinguish between skilled and unskilled occupations. The group of skilled occupations include electrician, carpenter, auxiliary nurse and hairdresser. These occupations’ average status score is 3.3 and Cronbach’s alpha is 0.84. Finally, the group of unskilled occupations includes kindergarten assistant, postal worker, shop clerk, taxi driver, cleaner and industrial worker. It has an average status score of 2.6 and alpha of 0.89.

The second dependent variable is the respondents’ assessment of the question ‘What status do you think each of the following occupations ought to have?’ We have made the same indexes of the occupations on this question, and the reliability measured by Cronbach’s alpha of these indexes is as good as the first category: elite/MA occupations Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$, BA occupations Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$, skilled working-class occupations Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$ and unskilled working-class occupations Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$.

The third dependent variable is the factors affecting occupational status. The respondents were asked ‘How important for occupational status do you consider the following factors to be?’ We then examine how class position correlates with the assessment of the following occupational characteristics: high earnings, good career prospects, highly influential, requires higher education, useful for society, honesty and high standard of morality, helping others and involving high risk.

Independent Variables

We operationalise respondents’ class position by using the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme (ORDC) (Hansen et al., 2009; see Figure 2). Inspired by Bourdieu’s (1984) model of the social space, it has a vertical dimension of capital volume and differentiates between four main classes: the upper, the upper-middle, the lower-middle and the working class. The horizontal dimension of capital composition crosscuts these: the three highest classes are divided into cultural, economic and balanced fractions. It is constructed by considering types and volumes of capital typically associated with given occupations, with an emphasis on cultural capital (in particular education types and length) and economic capital (various forms of income).

Informed by previous research that has shown that the differentiating principle of capital composition is most salient at the top of the class structure (Flemmen et al., 2019;

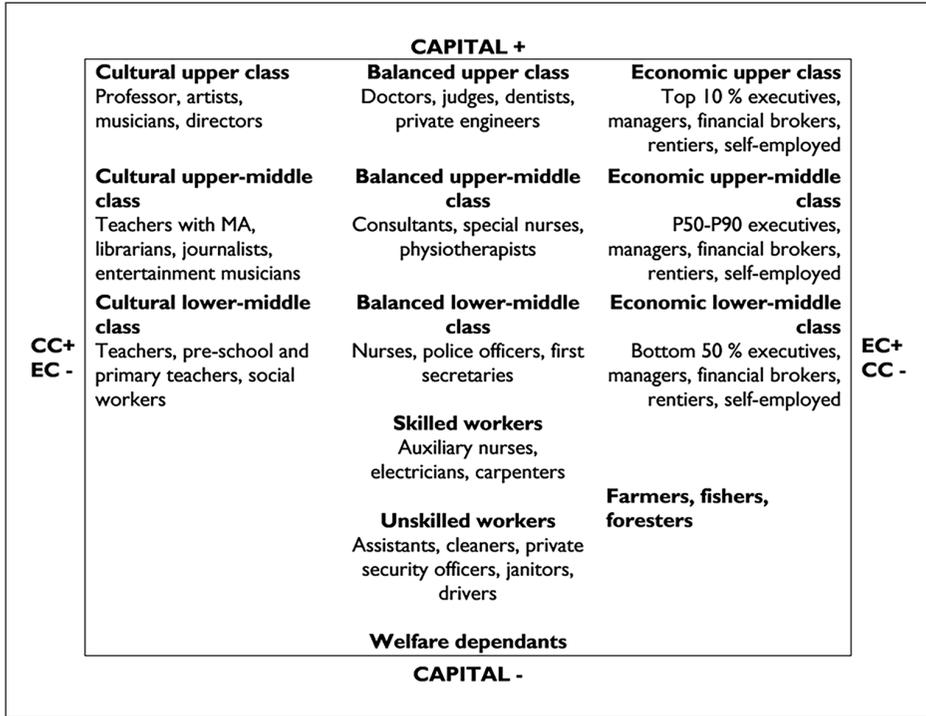


Figure 2. The ORDC scheme.

Rosenlund, 2009), we have simplified it. Specifically, the upper and upper-middle-class categories are combined because of low frequencies, and we do not distinguish between fractions in the lower middle-class nor between the skilled and the unskilled working class. We have also included people living on welfare transfers in the working class. In our application here, we employ five class categories: ‘cultural upper class’, ‘balanced upper class’, ‘economic upper class’, ‘lower middle class’ and ‘working class and welfare dependants’. Additionally, we employ ‘students’ as a separate category, because they often temporarily occupy low-skilled occupations. Table 1 shows the distribution of the main independent variables.

Control Variables

The distribution of the class categories (and different occupational groups) is not even across gender, regions and age, and we thus control for gender, region and age. Region is coded into categories representing the 19 election districts.⁴ Age is coded as ‘below 30’, ‘30–44’, ‘45–59’ and ‘60 and above’.

Table 1. Descriptives independent variables.

	N	%
Occupational class (ORDC)		
Cultural upper	520	12.6
Professional upper	880	21.3
Economic upper	672	16.2
Students	165	4.0
Lower middle	953	23.0
Working class/welfare	948	22.9
Gender		
Women	2160	51.0
Men	2075	49.0
Age group		
Below 30	453	10.7
30–44	1064	25.1
45–59	1513	35.7
60+	1205	28.5

Results

The Gap between Normative and Actual Occupational Status

We begin our analysis by examining how Norwegians as a whole assess occupational status. Table 2 shows that Norwegians recognise a clear hierarchy of occupations according to their required education: occupations requiring an MA degree are attributed the highest status and the unskilled occupations the lowest status. Between these extremes, we find occupations requiring a BA degree ranking higher than the skilled working-class occupations. Thus, education seems to matter for occupations' social status among most people, and Table 2 shows that this factor is rated quite high among the factors Norwegians think affect status only surpassed by high income, which also is common in our elite occupations.

Significantly, though, Table 2 shows there are notable differences between the status people think occupations have and the status they think such occupations *ought to have*. Specifically, the gap between the highly educated and unskilled occupations is much narrower. These results may suggest that the respondents' answers to these questions may be influenced by normative judgements linked to how they think occupational status ought to be. The gap between people's assessments of occupational status and the status occupations ought to have, are illustrated in more detail in Figure 1, showing the average assessments of all 32 occupations across these two measures. The figure illustrates the same egalitarian sentiment as we saw in Table 2. The respondents tend to rate the occupations that are low on general social status considerably higher when asked about the status occupations ought to have, while the high-status occupations are taken down somewhat. This difference between 'is' and 'ought to' is particularly apparent for the occupations that typically may be rated as 'useful to society' and/or as 'helping others',

Table 2. Descriptives on the dependent variables.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
How do you think most people will consider the status of the occupation?					
Elite professions/occupations requiring MA education	4195	5.4	0.8	1	7
Occupations requiring BA educations (e.g. nurse)	4196	4.0	0.7	1	7
Skilled working class (e.g. plumber, hairdresser)	4196	3.3	0.8	1	7
Unskilled working class (e.g. shop clerk, cleaner)	4192	2.6	0.9	1	7
What status do you think each of the following occupations ought to have?					
Elite professions/occupations requiring MA education	4164	4.9	0.8	1	7
Occupations requiring BA educations (e.g. nurse)	4166	4.6	0.8	1	7
Skilled working class (e.g. plumber, hairdresser)	4162	4.5	0.9	1	7
Unskilled working class (e.g. shop clerk, cleaner)	4158	4.1	1.0	1	7
How important for occupational status do you consider the following factors to be?					
High income	4103	6.1	1.0	1	7
Good career prospects	4068	5.5	1.0	1	7
Requires higher education	4123	5.5	1.1	1	7
Very influential	4095	5.9	1.1	1	7
Honesty and high standard of morality	4061	4.8	1.2	1	7
Useful for society	4078	4.8	1.1	1	7
Helping others	4083	4.6	1.1	1	7
Involves high risk	4020	4.2	1.2	1	7

like nurses, teachers, auxiliary nurses, child protection officers, social workers, pre-school teachers, farmers, kindergarten assistants and cleaners.

Classed Perceptions of Occupational Status

Next, we look at how such attitudes towards occupational status vary by class position. Below we present results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses with the variables presented in Table 2 as dependent variables. The results are visualised by showing predicted values on the dependent variables by social class position, with the other independent variables set at their mean. For each figure, the underlying regression analyses are in the Online Appendix.

Figure 3 shows how the four occupational groups' status among 'most people' vary between the class categories (the estimates are derived from the regressions presented in Appendix Table A1). Notably, this shows that while there are no class differences in assessments of elite occupations, working-class respondents are slightly more positive than other class groups about the status of the other three sets of occupational categories – particularly the working-class occupations.

Classed Perceptions of Normative Occupational Status

As we have seen, the difference between the top and the bottom of the occupational hierarchy is smaller when people think about the status occupations 'ought to have'. But how

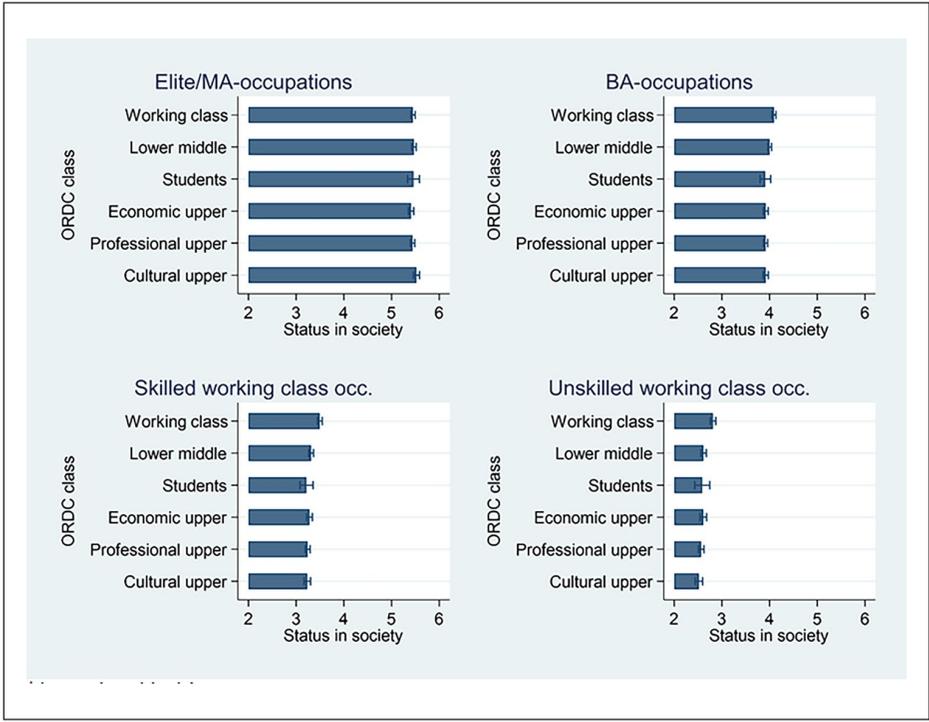


Figure 3. Predicted values of social status of different occupational groups, based on the question ‘How do you think most people will consider the status of the occupation?’ Estimates based on OLS-regression* with all other variables set at mean.
 *Appendix Table A1.

does this map onto people’s class position? Figure 4 shows that again there are no class differences in the assessments of the normative status of elite occupations. The assessments of the BA occupations are also quite similar, and it is only the economic and the balanced upper classes that differ statistically significantly from the working class. In their assessments of the normative value of working-class occupations, on the other hand, working-class respondents are again slightly more positive than respondents from other classes.

In sum, we have found an all-pervasive occupational status hierarchy with occupations requiring an MA degree at the top, and unskilled working-class occupations at the bottom. The ranking of the different occupations does not vary significantly between the respondents’ own social class position, but the distance between the top and the bottom of the hierarchy varies because working-class respondents assess the status of working-class occupations higher than upper-class respondents. We also find that the distance between the top and the bottom of the hierarchy is smaller when respondents are asked to assess the status occupations ought to have. Together, though, these results indicate support for the Bourdieusian idea that there is a ‘doxic naturalisation’ or acceptance of

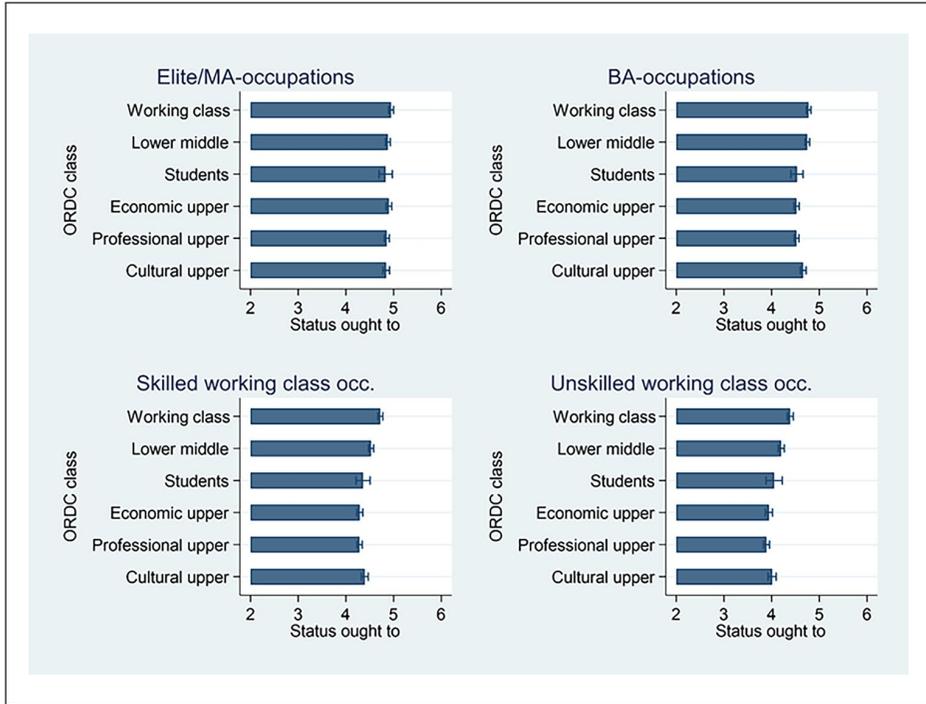


Figure 4. Predicted values of social status of different occupational groups, based on the question ‘What status do you think each of the following occupations ought to have?’ Estimates based on OLS-regression* with all other variables set at mean.

*Appendix Table A2.

status hierarchies among Norwegians, regardless of their own position within that hierarchy.

Factors Influencing Occupational Status

Finally, we look more closely at the respondents’ assessments of different factors that may influence occupational status, and how these vary by social class. In Figure 5, we examine factors related to individual-level rewards like high influence, high income, good career opportunities and higher education.⁵ As we saw in Table 2, the average assessments of these factors were higher than the other factors presented in Table 2.

Here, as above, the assessments are strikingly similar in different classes. The small statistically significant differences we find are that the working-class respondents rate the importance of high income and influence somewhat lower.

Figure 6 shows the class variation in the predicted values of the assessed importance of ‘selfless’ factors not related to personal gain: helping others, being useful for society, honesty and high standard of morality, and being exposed to high risk (or danger). The underlying regression analyses are presented in Appendix Table A4.

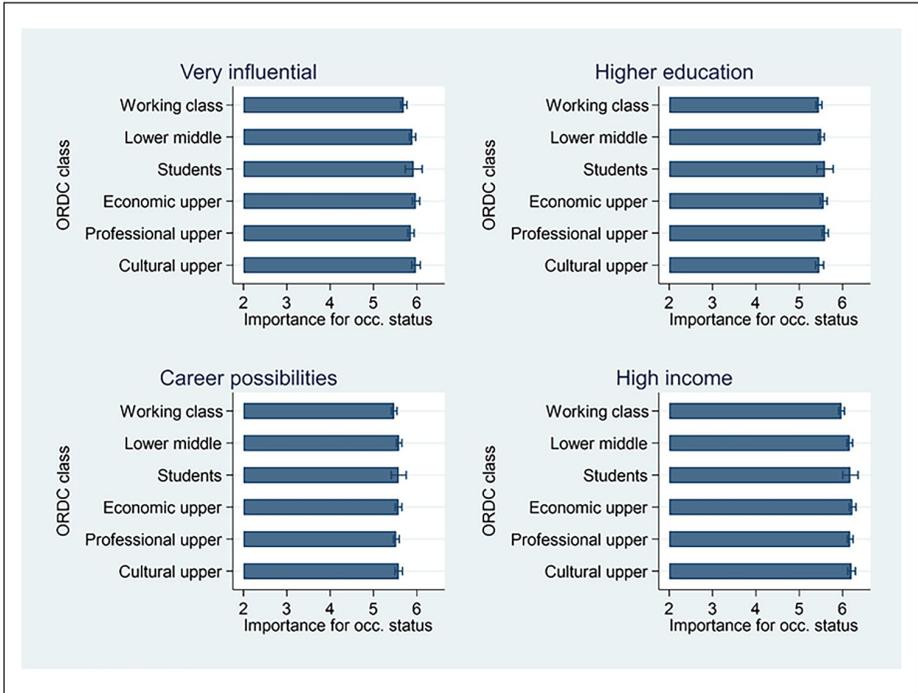


Figure 5. Predicted values for different factors’ importance for occupational status. Estimates based on OLS-regression* with all other variables set at mean.

*Appendix Table A3.

The respondents rate these more altruistic factors as less important for occupational status than they rated the more utilitarian factors in Figure 5, and respondents from different classes do not rate the importance of these factors differently.

Concluding Discussion

Much sociological work, across different perspectives on stratification assumes the existence of a clear occupational status hierarchy that is widely agreed on, regardless of a person’s class position. Our analysis empirically interrogates this assertion, drawing on unique Norwegian survey data collected in 2022 after the COVID pandemic. Our analysis shows that, even after COVID, people do indeed perceive a clear occupational status hierarchy (organised in terms of education required) and this ranking does not vary much according to people’s own social class position. It is certainly true that class differences exist in the distance status scores between occupations at the top and at the bottom of the status hierarchy (working-class respondents tend to attribute higher status scores to typical working-class occupations). Nonetheless, working-class respondents still tend to rank working-class occupations lower than occupations requiring higher-education credentials, indicating that the perceptions of the status ranking of occupations is similar across the class structure.

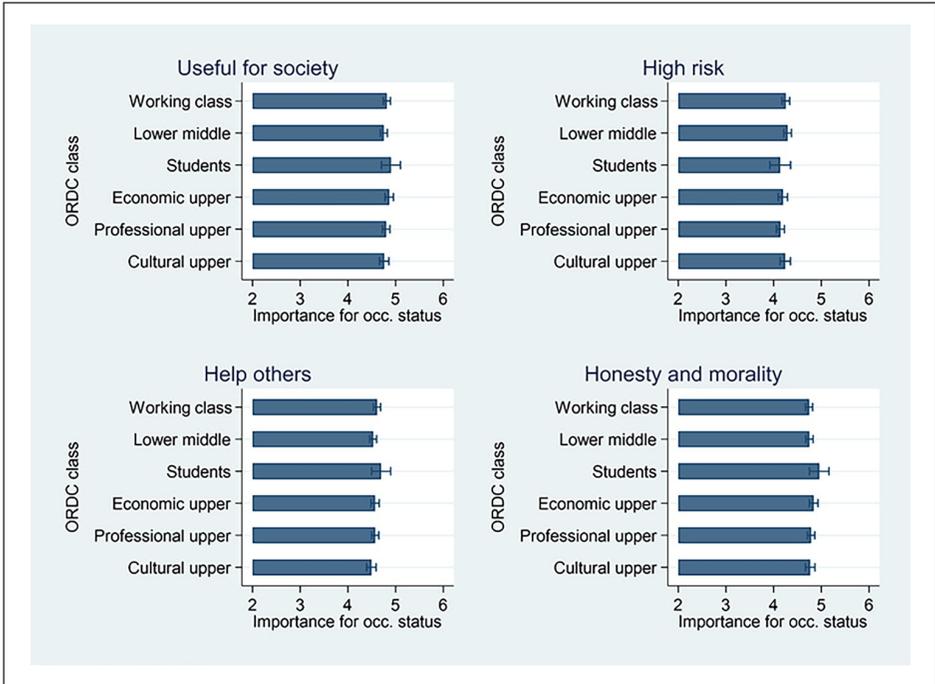


Figure 6. Predicted values for different factors’ importance for occupational status. Estimates based on OLS-regression* with all other variables set at mean.
 *Appendix Table A4.

Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, the analysis indicates that this ranking order is maintained even when respondents assess the level of status occupations *ought to have*. We do find some traces of class-specific differences. Respondents in the economic and the balanced factions of the upper class differ from the working-class respondents in their attribution of lower status scores to occupations requiring educational credentials at BA level. Conversely, working-class respondents are distinct in attributing higher status scores to typical working-class occupations. Nonetheless, the ranking order itself remains more or less intact. In other words, there are few traces of attempts to ‘upend’ the occupational status hierarchy by respondents situated at the lower regions of the class structure.

This, we would argue, is quite remarkable. If it were the case that people largely dispute existing status hierarchies – for instance due to perceptions of a morally unjust distribution of social esteem – one would expect that a considerable proportion of the population would assess and rank traditional low-status occupations above (or at least side by side with) traditional high-status occupations. This, our analysis suggests, is not the case. Although egalitarian sentiments are partly in evidence in the sense that the ‘ideal’ status order is more compressed when compared with (perceptions of) the existing status order, the results do not indicate inversions of the existing status order or even ideals of a ‘status-less’ society.

Furthermore, our analysis does not suggest any class differences in the criteria respondents use when they assess and rank the status of occupations. Although those in the working class emphasised the ‘utilitarian’ criteria of evaluation (high income and high influence) somewhat less strongly than the other classes, there are few traces of heterodox status inversions or egalitarian ideals of a ‘flat’ status structure.

In sum, our results sit uneasily with the dispute scenario associated with the Lamontian approach to class and status (see, for example, Lamont, 2000), and there is nothing in our analysis that suggests some sort of ‘upending’ of the status hierarchy. Indeed, even when asked explicitly to assess the level of status various occupations ought to have, they do not place traditional low-status occupations above (or side by side with) traditional high-status occupations.

In other words, our results indicate stronger support for the second hypothetical scenario derived from Bourdieu’s theory of class and classification struggles, involving a ‘doxic naturalisation’ or commonsensical acceptance of status hierarchies. Specifically, our analysis lends credence to recent accounts in Bourdieusian cultural class analysis suggesting that although egalitarian sentiments and moral status judgements against perceived snobbishness ‘from above’ may result in a sense of dignity and worthiness among the working class, this type of symbolic mobilisation seldom amounts to a delegitimisation of or challenge to existing status orders (see Harrits and Pedersen, 2018; Jarness and Flemmen, 2019; Jarness and Friedman, 2017; Lynn et al, 2024). On the contrary, this stream of research has suggested that an unintended consequence of attempts to instil alternative, moral criteria of evaluation may in fact be that the working class contributes to naturalising, and thereby legitimising, existing class–cultural status divisions.

This indicates a seemingly paradoxical scenario in which egalitarian moral criteria of evaluation go hand in hand with a tacit acceptance of existing status hierarchies. However, expanding on the argument developed by Gullestad (1992), these two strange bedfellows – egalitarianism and status hierarchisation – may function in conjunction because moral judgements directed ‘upwards’ tend to be individualised and case-specific. Specifically, since negative reactions tend to be limited to individuals explicitly displaying signs of social superiority (e.g. ‘snobbishness’, ‘flashiness’ and ‘elitism’) – and not to privileged people in general – this type of symbolic anti-elitism is seldom concerned with status hierarchies and inequalities per se (see Jarness and Flemmen, 2019). Indeed, some working-class people even have sympathies and express allegiances with privileged people or groups who are perceived as ‘ordinary’, ‘down-to-earth’ and, accordingly, ‘one of us’. This line of argument resonates well with our findings here: although working-class respondents may value economically self-interested-oriented criteria of status evaluation like income less highly than other groups, they nonetheless seem to (tacitly) accept a status order in which traditional high-status occupations like physicians, judges and professors are top ranked.

Although it may of course be the case that this scenario is particular to contemporary Norway and its distinctive societal characteristics – including a compressed wage structure, the ‘unified’ and largely tuition-free education system and widespread egalitarian sentiments – we suspect that similar processes may be found elsewhere. Indeed, recent studies from Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK suggest that people in privileged class positions see themselves as ‘ordinary’ and disidentify with ‘snobbery’; that they are

aware of anti-elitist, moral sentiments ‘from below’; and that they tend to downplay cultural differences in social encounters (see, for example, Jarness and Friedman, 2017; Kuipers et al., 2019; Reeves and Friedman, 2024; Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008; van Eijk, 2013; Vassenden, 2024). It does, however, remain an open empirical question whether such more or less strategic impression management is ‘successful’ beyond the case of Norway; that is, it would be sociologically fruitful to examine whether people in privileged class positions in other societal contexts actually avoid the moral suspicion from below while at the same time retaining recognition and a high level of social status. This, we would argue, can be mapped empirically by employing an analytical strategy similar to the one we have used here.

More generally, we would argue that theoretical-methodological insights from our study may contribute to the wider scholarly debate about class and status. First, our study highlights the importance of mapping the relationship *between* class and occupational status. Both within the American sociology of stratification and within the purported Weberian approach spearheaded by Chan and Goldthorpe, occupational status is typically used in empirical analyses as an independent variable to explain various outcomes. In our analysis, in contrast, occupational status is seen as the explanandum. Specifically, we have examined whether and how subjective assessments of occupational status vary according to respondents’ social position. However one wishes to operationalise respondents’ social position – for example, SES, Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) or ORDC – we would argue that the mapping of such connections is crucial if we are to understand whether and how the legitimacy of status hierarchies is ‘bestowed from below’; that is, the conditions under which the status of those on top of social hierarchies is somehow accepted and endorsed by subordinate groups (cf. Parkin, 2002: 77–78). Such investigations are precluded by fiat if occupational status is only operationalised in terms of respondents’ social position and not as the outcome of respondents’ assessments and rankings.

Second, our study contributes with novel insights into the burgeoning stream of Bourdieusian cultural class analysis. Although previous research within this tradition has investigated connections between class and status, the thematic scope has been rather limited. Indeed, this stream of research has been primarily concerned with the connection between class and status in terms of lifestyles and cultural consumption (see, for example, Bennett et al., 2009; Prieur et al., 2008) and, to a lesser extent, the connection between class and status in terms of differential association and social networks (see, for example, Alecu et al., 2022). Expanding on Flemmen’s (2013) critique of contemporary applications of Bourdieusian class analysis and their tendency to turn away the conventional concerns of class analysis, we would argue that the concern with the connection between the structure of the social space and subjective assessments of occupational status can be a way to steer the Bourdieusian class analysis back towards the original concerns of class analysis. Specifically, we side with Lamont’s (1992) critique of an unfortunate tendency to assume that cultural and symbolic *differences* automatically lead to status *hierarchisation* and relations of symbolic domination. According to Lamont, this link can and should be mapped empirically. Translated to our specific concern here: one cannot readily assume that the occupational structure – or more generally, the

structure of the social space – mirrors a structure of an unequal distribution of recognition and social status.

Pace Lamont, however, we would argue that her approach to map how individuals draw on various criteria of evaluation to demarcate ‘us’ from ‘them’ is important but insufficient to map how social hierarchies are perceived and whether hierarchies are accepted or disputed. Indeed, as we have seen in our analysis, even though classes and class fractions exhibit distinct criteria of evaluation to assess occupational status, they still end up assessing and ranking the status of occupations in largely similar ways. Specifically, we highlight that the salience of moral criteria of evaluation (e.g. altruism or egalitarianism) do not automatically lead to some form of challenge to social hierarchies – although we acknowledge that this may reflect our methodological approach and that more subtle disputation may be discernible using qualitative methods. In our case, however, the opposite seems to be the case. In other words, although ‘we’ demarcate ourselves symbolically from ‘them’, ‘we’ may still look up to ‘them’.

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ORCID iDs

Håvard Helland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1231-1434>

Sam Friedman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0629-1761>

Vegard Jarness  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4749-8793>

Jørn Ljunggren  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8459-8286>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For more information on the data, see <https://www.oslomet.no/en/research/research-projects/protrust-status-and-trust-in-occupational-groups>.
2. The Gallup Panel is one of the few access panels in Europe that has achieved the ISO standard 26362: 2009. This is a strict quality standard for operation and maintenance of access panels and means that Gallup’s standards are higher than the industry standard. The Gallup Panel is mainly recruited on representative surveys conducted on the phone using the probability sample. This makes the Gallup Panel one of the very few panels in the world based on probability selection.
3. For average status scores of the different occupations, see Appendix Tables A5 and A6.

4. We control for region because both the industrial structure and the relative size of different occupations vary by county. This affects the regional distribution on the ORDC-variable and may also affect the assessments of different occupations.
5. The underlying regression analyses are presented in Appendix Table A3.

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Håvard Helland is a Professor at the Centre for the Study of Professions at Oslo Metropolitan University. His main research interests are social inequalities in education and the labour market. Recent articles have appeared in *British Journal of Sociology*, *Work & Occupations*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *European Societies* and *Studies in Higher Education*.

Sam Friedman is Professor of Sociology at The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He is the author of *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged, Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a ‘Good’ Sense of Humour*, and co-author of *Social Class in the 21st Century*. His recent book (with Professor Aaron Reeves) entitled *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite* was named a ‘2024 Book of the Year’ by *The Economist* and *The Times*, and won the 2024 Mary Douglas Book Prize from the American Sociological Association. He is the co-editor of the *British Journal of Sociology*.

Vegard Jarness is Senior Advisor at InFact AS, and an independent scholar who was previously employed at Oslo Metropolitan University and the University of Bergen. His research interests include class, status and cultural and political divisions. Recent publications have appeared in *Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *European Societies* and *Poetics*.

Jørn Ljunggren is Research Professor at Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, and Professor II at the Centre for Gender Research, University of Oslo. His research primarily focuses on the analysis of social inequality, segregation, elites, power and the interplay between various factors such as social background, gender and ethnicity.

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