

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



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

Keywords: social status, inequality, social networks, status windows, windows overlap

Social status is fundamental to understanding social inequality and our responses to it (see Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014; Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue). For many structurally oriented inequality scholars, the role of social status in understanding social inequality and its consequences has remained in the background or has focused on occupational status (see, for example, Sakamoto 2020). However, recent substantive developments around the globe and in the United States have sparked a renewed interest in status as a driver

of persistent social inequality and as a mechanism for understanding why collective responses to inequality seem inadequate or counterproductive (see Hacker and Pearson 2010; Cramer 2016; Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018; Kelly 2019).

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

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

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

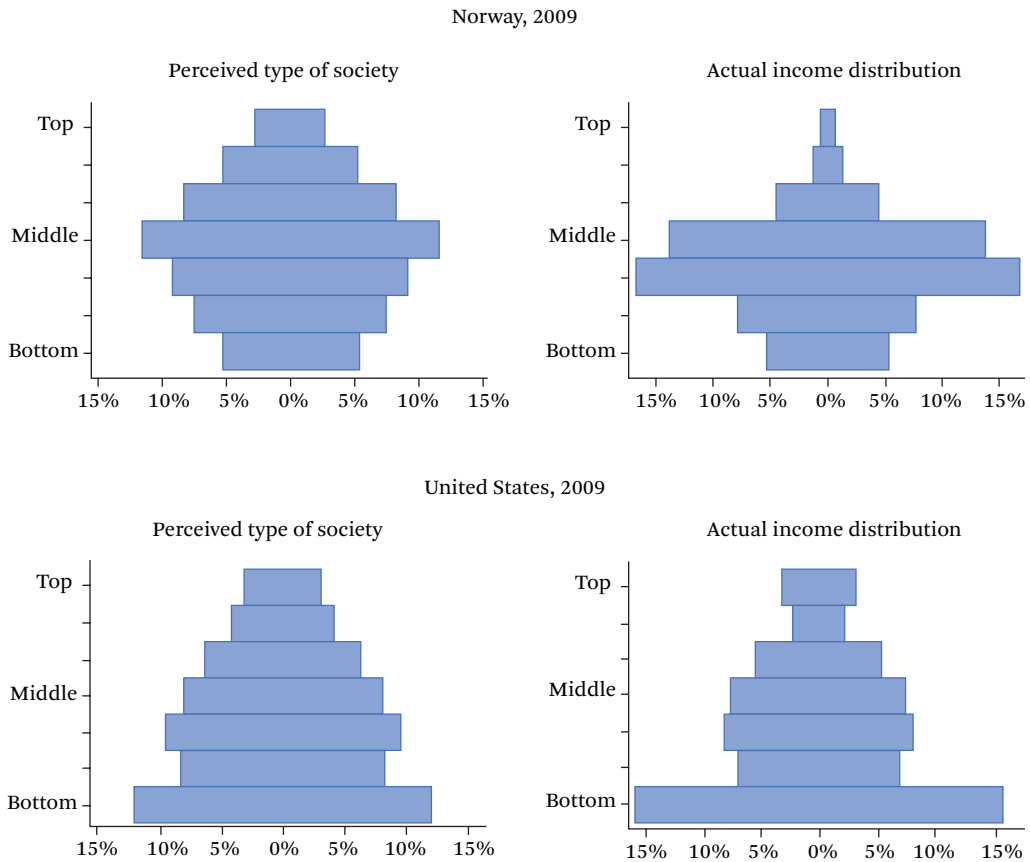
believe that inequality is too high; the focus and obsession on high status, but demographically trivial positions in public cultural discourse; and the focus on business gurus and the worship of extremely successful entrepreneurs without an accompanying understanding of the contexts for their success.

INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STATUS: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

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

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

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

Figure 1. Perceptions of Inequality in High- and Low-Inequality Environments

Source: EU-SILC n.d.; ISSP 2009; PSID 2022; author's tabulation based on Niehues 2014.

Note: Population shares in seven income classes from Niehues 2014.

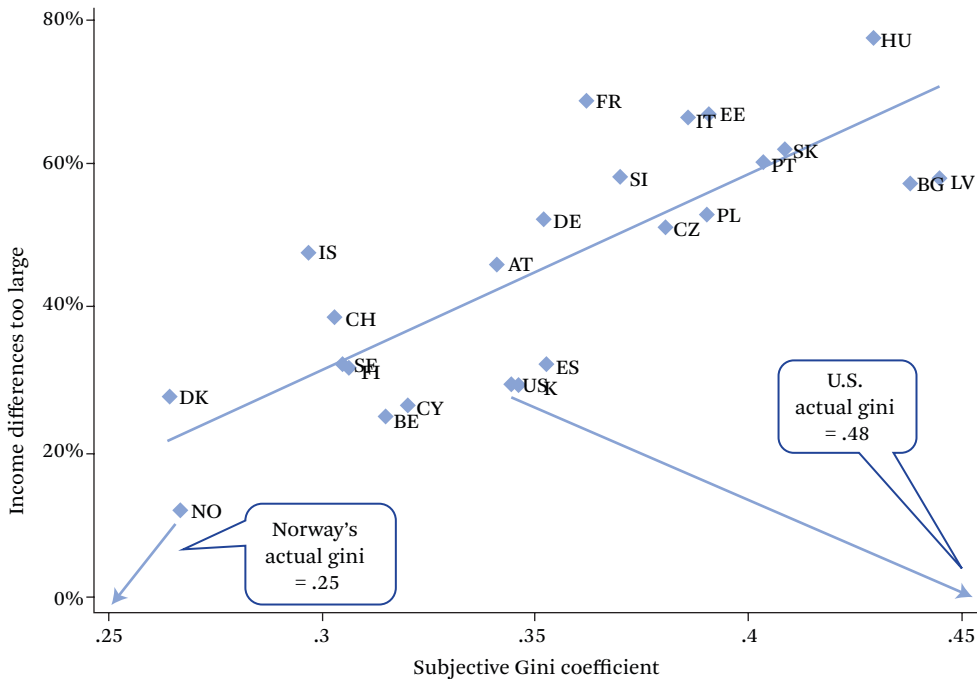
margin. Of the ISSP respondent nations, the U.S. relationship between perception and reality is the most askew and in the wrong direction: Americans think there is quite a bit less inequality than there actually is.

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

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

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

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

Figure 2. Perceptions of Inequality and Preferences for Redistribution

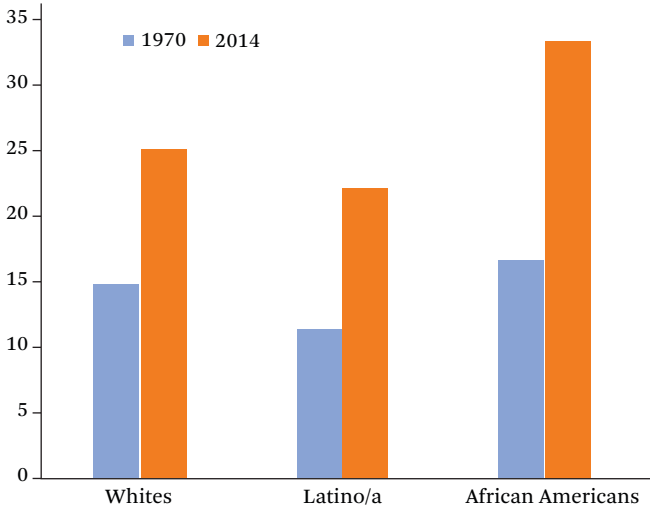
Source: Author's tabulation based on Niehues 2014; ISSP 2009.

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

Misperceptions of how inequality has grown and its relationship to different status groups

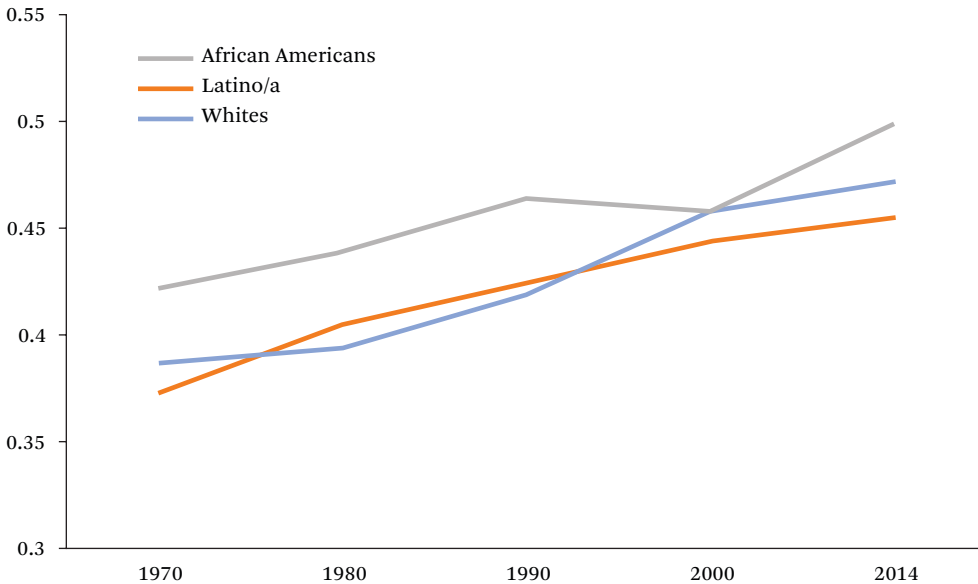
are also serious. This complicates common understandings of the relationship between social status and material inequalities still further. For example, most of the new inequality created in the United States since 1980 has occurred within racial and gender categories and not between them (see Leicht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

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

Figure 3. Income Inequality

Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table H-1.

Note: Figures are the ratios of mean household income in the top 5 percent and lowest 20 percent by race-ethnicity.

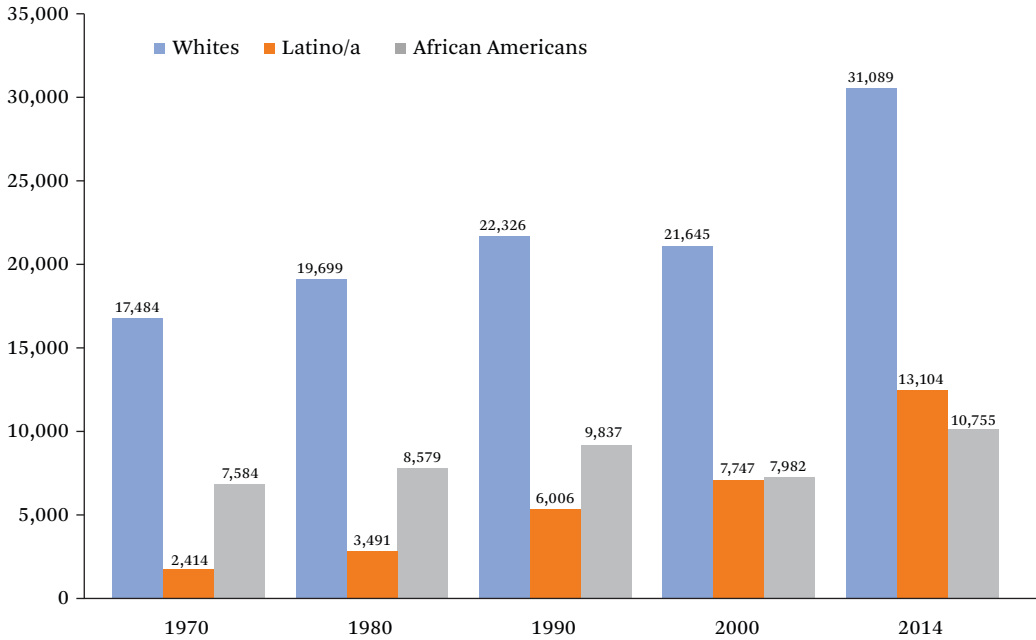
Figure 4. Gini Indices for Households

Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d. [GINIHARF].

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

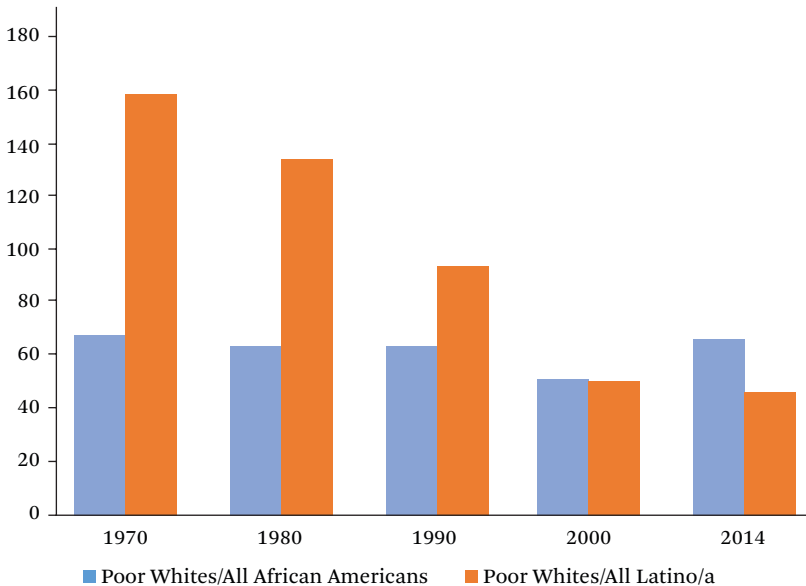
All of this information has several implications for understanding the relationship between social status and continuous measures of inequality. First, our perceptions of inequality and its severity grows poorer as inequality

Figure 5. Persons in Poverty



Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table 3.

Figure 6. Ratio of Whites in Poverty to African Americans and Latinos



Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau n.d., table 3.

Note: At one hundred, there is one poor white person for every African American or Latino, regardless of economic status.

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

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

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

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

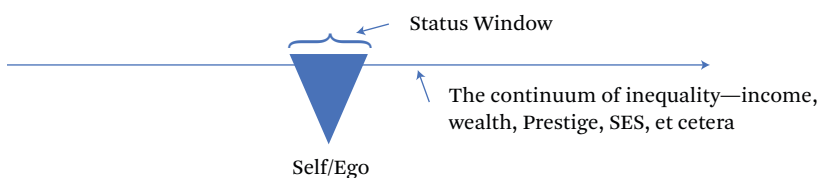
A status window is the portion of the social inequality environment directly salient and viewable to any given ego or individual in the system. Within a person's status window are a series of status evaluations of worthiness and unworthiness that produce the status evaluations at the root of many status distinctions. The status window is the portion of the social inequality system we see and understand in the concrete. Its "width" is determined by cognitive limitations and shortcuts we resort to as part of our individual life-worlds (the top of the tri-

angle in figure 7). But our overall understanding of the social inequality system we live in is determined by the interaction between the window width and the extent of continuous-dimension social inequality in the overall society or cultural group (wealth or income, for example).

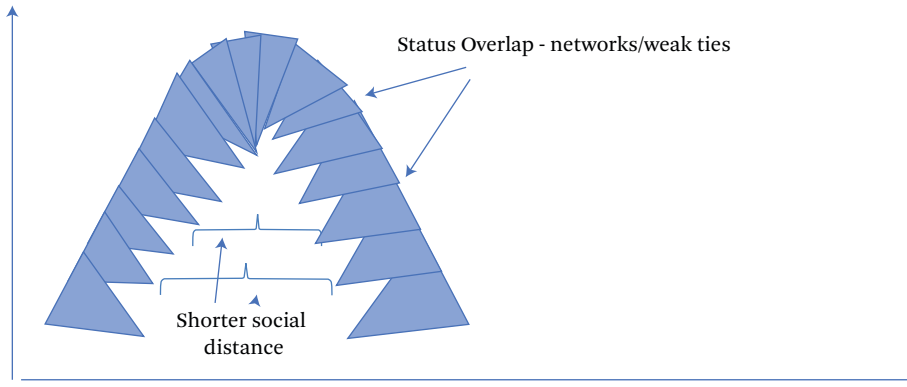
Because status windows are affected by cognitive and time-constraint limitations (most people do not have unlimited brainpower and time to devote to understanding the world around them) a uniformly sized status window will create a broader understanding of a low-inequality environment than a high-inequality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

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

Figure 7. The "Status Window"



Source: Author's tabulation.

Figure 8. Status Windows in a Low Inequality Environment

Source: Author's tabulation.

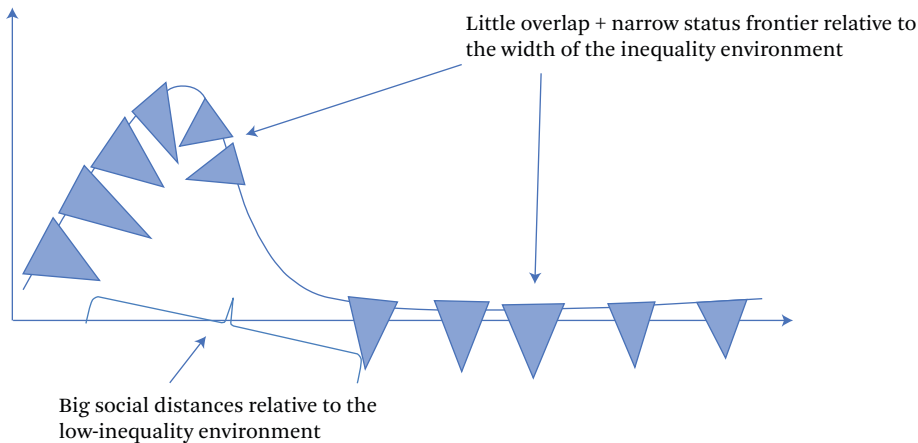
But this is not the case in a high-inequality environment like the United States. In a high-inequality environment (figure 9), the same-sized status window covers a much smaller portion of any continuous-dimension of inequality, the status windows of individuals do not overlap or overlap very little,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

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

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

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

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

Figure 9. Status Windows in a High-Inequality Environment

Source: Author's tabulation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, people in high-inequality environments have poorer quality social relationships (see Wilkinson and Pickett 2017). Higher inequality also is associated with higher levels of narcissism and self-enhancing behaviors. Higher-status people, in particular, come to see

their positions as deserved (Lowrey, Knowles, and Unzueta 2007); high-status people are also less generous and people in high-inequality countries express less compassion overall (Cote, House, and Willer 2015). These are part of a larger motivated reasoning response to high inequality some researchers claim is present in places that emphasize meritocracy (see Roex, Huijts, and Sieben 2019; Brooks and Harter 2021).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why American Voters Don't Champion Economic Redistribution

I start with one of the long-standing paradoxes of high-inequality environments, especially the

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

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

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

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

Why We Focus on Demographic Representation in Demographically Trivial Jobs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Business Guru Worship and Fundamental Attribution Error

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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