Keep Moving Forward:
Class Differentials in Social Status from the Perspective of Adolescents

Aske Kragh Cryer

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Class Differentials in Social Status from the Perspective of Adolescents

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Aske Kragh Cryer
Aarhus, March 2024

But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done! Now, if you know what you're worth, then go out and get what you're worth. But you gotta be willing to take the hits, and not pointing fingers saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him, or her, or anybody. Cowards do that and that ain't you. You're better than that!
- Rocky Balboa

Preface

The following dissertation presents a general summary of my PhD project, *Keep Moving Forward: Class Differentials in Social Status from the Perspective of Adolescents*, written at the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University from February 2021 to January 2024. The report outlines the conceptual and methodological framework of the project and highlights its key empirical findings, while also discussing theoretical issues and societal implications that reach across the three research papers I've authored as part of the project:

- Affluence, Ability, and Agency: How Adolescents Make Sense of the Interaction between Class Inequality and Status Hierarchy (Paper A)
- Indistinct Distinctions: Adolescents' Perceptions of Class Disparities in Status Relations between Peers (Paper B)
- Rise and Shine: Adolescents' Vocational Development Under the Influence of Class Stereotypes (Paper C)

This dissertation can be read as a standalone report, but readers are referred to the three papers for further details on specific theoretical arguments, design choices, and findings.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I hate praising net worth over legwork
I hate ceding all power to the extroverts
I find the current social architecture hell on Earth
We make shepherds, and shadow them into the netherworld.
- Aesop Rock, *That Is Not a Wizard*

When we look across the current span of societies in Europe, we find that in nearly all cases, two systems of stratification cut across human communities and divide their members against one another: Material inequality in resource access and structural conditions on the one hand, and status hierarchy in esteem and influence on the other (Bourdieu 1989; Weber 2010; Ridgeway 2019). Often referred to by the shorthand labels of *social class* and *social status*, respectively, these twin rank orders have frequently become deeply intertwined throughout history (Sennett & Cobb 1972; Flannery & Marcus 2012), as people in superior socioeconomic positions often come to hold higher social and moral standing than those located on lower rungs of the class ladder (Skeggs 2012). The desire to be held in positive esteem among others is, according to contemporary psychological research, a fundamental human need (Anderson et al. 2015), so when class and status become linked with one another, those who suffer under the hardships of material disadvantage are simultaneously exposed to the deep pain of social devaluation and its attendant loss of influence in communal relations, compounding their marginalization in society.

It is not long ago, for instance, that poor and unskilled citizens were considered so unequal in stature to the propertied and the educated that they were denied political rights in many cultures (Marshall & Bottomore 1992: 12-13; Piketty 2022: 104). In premodern European history, workers performing manual and routine functions were commonly thought of as being naturally inferior to those in the higher classes, a notion perpetuated by such influential intellectual figures as Thomas Aquinas, who included laborers in his description of "cives imperfecti" – imperfect citizens who were deficient in core moral values and who were made to be ruled and guided by their betters (Volpato et al. 2017: 194). In 18th century North America, the same elites who famously declared all men to be equal also monopolized political influence and social esteem among the wealthy, while privately referring to the lower classes as "waste people", "rubbish", and "persons of mean and vile condition" (Isenberg

2016). The great body of the population was, in the eyes of President Thomas Jefferson, unsavory characters who stood in contrast to the "natural aristocracy among men" – the select few who possessed such excellent qualities that it was only proper that they should rise above the common masses.[1]

Pervasive as this linkage between social class and social status has been throughout history, it has often been met with fierce resistance from the subordinated class groups that it denied access to esteem. The revolts of the Age of Revolutions were driven largely by popular demands for rights and recognition, demands that ultimately were successful in securing full citizenship and political franchise for even the poor and the propertyless (Marshall & Bottomore 1992). During the Age of Enlightenment, entrenched aristocratic value systems were powerfully challenged by liberal reformers arguing that individual ability and merit should be valued over such arbitrary factors as family background (Sennett & Cobb 1972: 61; Markovits 2019), advocating for meritocratic systems of advancement where people from all walks of life could climb the ladder of distinction (Sandel 2020). Finally, the great labor movements and cross-class coalitions of the 19th and 20th centuries did much bring workers out of social subordination by fighting for economic redistribution, greater political inclusion, and formal recognition of labor rights (Giddens 1982; Esping-Andersen 1990; Wright 2000). Across the world, the history of human society has not solely been the history of stratification, but also of a long and determined struggle for equality, for a social order where a person is worth more than just their position on the socioeconomic ladder (Piketty 2022).[2]

Despite the best efforts and the hard-won victories of the proponents of equality, however, social class and social status remain deeply and intimately linked in many contemporary societies (Kraus et al. 2013; Ridgeway & Markus 2022). This is evident, for instance, in the fact that European citizens with short educations increasingly report feeling misrecognized and undervalued by society at large (Van Noord et al. 2021). In both Germany and the United

[1] Quoted from the private correspondence of Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams dated October 18th 1813: https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s61.html

[2] It should be noted that this trend must be characterized as an imperfect push towards equalization, firstly because it only served to decrease the absolute economic and social distance between groups and classes in society and not to render them true equals (Piketty 2022); and secondly because many marginalized groups, such as gender minorities and sexual minorities as well as many ethnic groups, often have not benefitted to the same extent as those who were more closely aligned with the cultural majority (Marshall & Bottomore 1992: 67ff).

States of America, people in working-class jobs have consistently reported lower levels of subjective social status than those in higher class positions over the past five decades (Nolan & Weisstanner 2022), and labor market outsiders are widely stigmatized throughout the Western world (Soss et al. 2011; Durante et al. 2017). Worse yet, there are signs that such class-based status disparities may be widening and that their deleterious effects are intensifying: a growing number of scholars argue that status anxiety among lower-class groups is one of the main drivers of such alarming trends as the rise of far-right populist movements in many democracies (Gidron & Hall 2017; Engler & Weisstanner 2020) and the surge in stress-induced illness and death witnessed in the United States (Case & Deaton 2021; King et al. 2022). In spite of all the social, political, and economic progress made over the past centuries, it would seem that class inequality still casts a heavy shadow over the hierarchies of esteem and respect that structure our societies and communities.

How are we to make sense of this persistent relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy? In this dissertation, I argue that if we wish to understand why these two systems of stratification remain so thoroughly entangled even after many determined endeavors to separate them, we need to take a close look at how social status hierarchies are constructed in contemporary Western societies. And in order to do so, I claim, we need to listen to a segment that is often neglected in the great scholarly debates about the causes and consequences of stratification: *adolescents*.

This may, at first glance, seem like a strange, perhaps almost facetious, claim to make, especially given the grand historical tenor of the preceding paragraphs. But adolescents have always been key to the constitution and transformation of human society.[3] In the words of Paul Willis, one of the 20th century's leading researchers of youth and education, young people are the "foot soldiers of modernity" – the first to notice cultural change and the quickest to adapt to it (2003: 391). And more than any other cultural phenomenon, adolescents are intensely attentive to and affected by hierarchies of prominence

[3] This has been demonstrated time and again over the past century, where many influential social movements have found some of their strongest supporters in adolescents and young adults (Flanagan 2013; Earl et al. 2017) – from the civil rights movements of the 20th century to contemporary climate movements. The transformative potential of young people has also historically been the focus of more sinister social forces, perhaps shown most infamously by the Nazi movement in Germany and its deep fixation with gaining influence over society's young. As Adolf Hitler stated at the National Socialist Party's annual rally in 1935: "He alone who owns the youth gains the future" (Waxman 2019).

and esteem. While adults experience social hierarchies ambiently, being so accustomed to them that we often respond fluidly to status signals without even being conscious of it (Ridgeway & Markus 2022: 14), adolescents monitor status differentials with keen and at times near obsessive diligence (LaFontana & Cillessen 2002; Lansu et al. 2012). Yet we know little about how young people perceive and make sense of the interaction between class stratification and social status hierarchy in their societies, even as these societies grow increasingly unequal and increasingly fraught with the tension and anxiety of mounting status differentials. In this dissertation, I seek to take a first step towards addressing this oversight by investigating the following research question:

> *How do adolescents make sense of the relationship between social class and social status in society as a whole, in their peer system, and in the labor market?*

The project is motivated by three core concerns: First, I argue that adolescence is a sensitive period for developing our basic *status beliefs*, defined as our intuitive ideas about which traits, behaviors, and identities most people in society find worthy of esteem and attention (Ridgeway & Markus 2022: 10). A sophisticated research literature has shown that we all carry such beliefs with us, drawing on them quite unconsciously when we participate in the negotiation of status hierarchies within relations, communities, and organizations (Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway 2019), and that we form them largely by observing how status is allocated within interactions (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway 2019) and cultural representations (Ridgeway & Fisk 2012). Yet extant studies of the construction of status beliefs have focused exclusively on adults, neglecting a critical insight from recent research in developmental psychology: that we are most sensitive to social influence and social evaluation, the core mechanisms of status hierarchization, during adolescence (Sebastian et al. 2010; Blakemore & Mills 2014; Powers et al. 2022).

While we spend our entire lives encountering and navigating social hierarchies, we are never more sensitive to them and their tacit rules of how one should and should not be than we are during the tumultuous years of our youth. This is so commonly acknowledged in our shared cultural narratives about the life course that we almost take it for granted: In popular culture, stories involving adolescents mostly revolve around histrionic contests for popularity and prominence within peer groups or coming-of-age dramas in which young people grapple with the difficult task of gaining respect in the eyes of adults. Yet while it is widely acknowledged that our teenage years are deeply formative and that they involve intense sensitivity to status hierarchy, it remains largely unexamined how we learn to understand the interaction between social class and social status during this period of life. In this thesis, I

advance the claim that any beliefs we might form about how esteem is allocated across class identities are likely to be especially salient and durable if we form them during adolescence. We will almost certainly update and alter these beliefs later in life, but this will always be a process of revision and reflection in *relation* to what we believed initially. In other words, my contention is that it is in adolescence that we first arrive at a firm *baseline* for our status beliefs, so if we wish to understand why class-based status differentials persist in contemporary societies, we must investigate how young people perceive such differentials, and how they learn to explain and make sense of them.

The second motivating concern behind this dissertation is that adolescents are themselves participants in the construction of social status hierarchies – they are not passive "citizens-in-waiting", but active elements in society who greatly affect what goes on within it (Willis 2003; Flanagan 2013; Earl et al. 2017). Young people inhabit many of the same social spaces as full adults: they are loud and ubiquitous actors in public life, often found terrorizing movie theaters and parks in giggling friend groups; they are autonomous economic agents, whose purchasing power and attention is highly coveted by businesses and influencers; they are digital natives, omnipresent and influential on social media; and they are workers, manning a large portion of society's routine job functions in part-time gigs and apprenticeships, participating in conversations in breakrooms and doing their best not to roll their eyes at frustrating customers. In all these arenas, adolescents are primary participants in the interactions that give rise to status beliefs, constructing hierarchies through what they say and what they do, who they make fun of and who they pay attention to. Perhaps because of their elevated sensitivity to the ebb and flow of status dynamics, young people tend to be "status entrepreneurs", constantly injecting the beliefs that they form about who is and isn't worthy of esteem into society. Thus, if adolescents learn to think of the class ladder as a ladder of prominence and respect, the rest of us may eventually follow suit.

Finally, just as adolescents are co-producers of society's dominant status hierarchies, they are also victims of the at times heavy evaluative judgments implied in these hierarchies. While people of all ages care about being seen as worthy by others, adolescents are particularly sensitive to evaluation and highly vulnerable to rejection (Blakemore & Mills 2014) – to the point that they are willing to engage in risk behaviors that will put them in physical danger just to escape the social threat of being devalued by others (Blakemore 2018; Powers et al. 2022). This is the primary driver behind the status fixation of young people: They are willing to go to extreme lengths to acquire esteem because they may suffer grievous psychological harm if they fail to gain it (Sebastian et al. 2010). For this reason, the degree to which class inequality conditions access to social status in society may have direct consequences for the

life and well-being of young people: Firstly, because it may jeopardize the self-esteem of adolescents from lower class origins, and secondly because it may shape what adolescents from all backgrounds think they must accomplish in life if they wish to grow into people worthy of respect. One concern, here, is that class-based status differentials may interfere with the *vocational development* of young people, defined as their exploration of and commitment to available career paths (Gottfredson 1981; Porfeli & Lee 2012). If adolescents learn to associate higher class positions with greater status than those further below on the socioeconomic ladder, they may come to think that pursuing working- and middle-class professions is equivalent to settling for social subordination – potentially harming the dignity of those young people who do, ultimately, end up in such professions, while also harming recruitment to these essential occupational groups.

To put it quite briefly, there is a lot at stake in how adolescents experience and make sense of status hierarchy – not just for young people, but for all of us. And over the course of this dissertation, I will describe how I have attempted to investigate this issue and what insights my investigations have produced. The dissertation summarizes the arguments and empirical findings of three research articles that study how adolescents make sense of the interaction between social class and social status in three different arenas of life: Adult society, their relations with same-age peers, and the labor market.

In paper A, I set out to examine the basic question at the heart of my research project: Whether adolescents maturing into affluent, post-industrial societies learn to think of the socioeconomic class ladder as a ladder of esteem and prominence. Drawing on a qualitative interview study conducted with a diverse group of Danish adolescents, I show that young people in Denmark believe that there is a clear and quite commonly accepted class gradient in the society that surrounds them. As told by the participants in this interview study, one must display three traits to gain status in Denmark: An *affluent lifestyle* characterized by luxury consumption and economic freedom, high *personal ability and intelligence*, and an *agentic orientation* towards life marked by ambition and a willingness to exert great effort to achieve desired outcomes. The interview participants believed that it is widely agreed in Danish society that people in elevated class positions tend to excel in all three traits, convincing them that their society is marked by a strong linkage between class and status.

In paper B, I examine whether young people in Denmark carry this class-status linkage with them into another highly impactful aspect of their lives: The hierarchies of popularity and prominence that structure their relations with same-age peers. Here, I find that Danish adolescents perceive a complex and ambiguous relationship between social class and social status at the peer

level. Drawing again on a detailed interview study, I show that young people in Denmark believe that class inequalities *can* matter for one's status among peers, but that those who are marked by socioeconomic disadvantage can overcome this by displaying great personal autonomy and confidence. This second study demonstrates that young people tend to be well aware of class differentiation within their peer communities, but that they believe that the constraining influences of class ultimately can be conquered by the power of personal agency.

Finally, in paper C, I investigate whether we see any sign of a class-status linkage in the vocational development of young people – their emerging aspirations for and anxieties about their future position in society. Employing a statistical analysis of a large comparative dataset, I show that European adolescents with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to aspire for occupations placed at the top of the class ladder than ones in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, while the opposite is true for adolescents who doubt their own abilities. This study demonstrates that young people who think of themselves as capable and agentic people overwhelmingly match themselves with positions at the highest levels of the class system, indicating that adolescents across Europe have come to see the class ladder as a ladder of *competence* – a primary determinant of status in contemporary Western societies (Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway & Markus 2022).

Taken together, these studies indicate that young people maturing into contemporary European societies indeed learn to believe that people in higher class positions tend to hold higher social status than people in lower class positions. They draw this linkage between social class and social status because they learn that esteem should be allocated to those who engage in impressive and affluent lifestyles, those who are more capable and intelligent than most, and those who work hard and exercise great agency to overcome constraints standing in the way of their goals – traits that they simultaneously come to believe are concentrated among those located on the highest rungs of the class ladder. The wealthy, the highly educated, and those who've made it to the top of lengthy professional and commercial careers appear to young people as publicly valorized exemplars of affluence, ability, and agency, while people in intermediate class positions fade into the background like nondescript bystanders and those in low positions seem like pitiable outsiders. The dissertation also shows that adolescents believe that people in higher class positions have *earned* their distinction through their own personal actions, echoing the tenets of a "meritocratic ideology" that extant research has identified among adults in contemporary Western societies (Sandel 2020; Mijs 2021), but which I show to be just as prevalent among youth cohorts maturing into these societies.

The dissertation proceeds in the following way: In chapter 2, I set out to conceptualize the two phenomena of class inequality and status hierarchy that are at the center of this research project. Along the way, I also review relevant strands of research into these twin systems of stratification, and I outline what we currently know about how young people encounter them as they mature and learn to make sense of the communities and societies they inhabit. In chapter 3, I present some of the central methodological considerations that have informed the research designs I've made use of in the project. I discuss how it might be possible to measure and interpret the impressions that young people form of class inequality and status hierarchy, and I present some of the rather unique challenges that are involved with conducting research with adolescent participants, along with my attempts to address these challenges. In chapter 4, I summarize the findings of the empirical studies reported in my three research articles, highlighting how each paper provides part of the answer to the dissertation's overall research question. In chapter 5, I take a step back and attempt to situate the findings of this present dissertation in a broader historical context by reflecting on how the linkage between social class and social status has evolved in Western cultures over the past centuries. Finally, chapter 6 presents a discussion of the implications that my findings have for contemporary European societies and for young people struggling to find a place for themselves in these societies.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Cash rules everything around me.
- Method Man, C.R.E.A.M.

The problem under consideration in this dissertation is, at its core, a fairly simple one: it concerns how a specific segment of the population – adolescents – understand the relationship between social class and social status as interrelated systems of stratification in society. Put differently, the question being asked is really no more complex than whether young people tend to believe that one's position on the status ladder of social esteem usually is quite close to one's position on the class ladder of socioeconomic advantage, or whether they think that people may hold very different positions on these two rank orders.

Yet underneath this seemingly straightforward question hides a vast swamp of conceptual uncertainty. For in order to provide a credible answer, we must first consider what class inequality and status hierarchy actually are – and few phenomena have provoked so much debate within the social sciences as these two (e.g. Wright 2015 and Savage 2016 for discussions about class; Flemmen et al. 2019 and Ridgeway 2019 for discussions about status). Scholars as well as lay people tend to disagree markedly on what class inequality and status hierarchy looks like, what's causing them, and who is up and who is down on these two ladders that we all find ourselves precariously perching on.

To set the stage for the presentation of the dissertation's empirical studies, this chapter explains how I've elected to conceptualize and define the two central concepts of social class and social status. Along the way, the chapter will also briefly outline what we currently know about how young people encounter these twin systems of stratification in the formative years of childhood and adolescence.

2.1 Class Inequality: Resource Distributions, Structural Conditions, and Occupational Stratification

Social class stratification is perhaps one of the most storied concepts in the social sciences, having been at the center of research in economics, sociology, and political science since the inception of these disciplines. This long intellectual lineage of class research affords us with a deep and rich tradition to

build our contemporary investigations on, but it also entangles these investigations in a knotted web of debates and controversies, some of which have been playing out for centuries. Class scholars have, for this reason, acquired something of a reputation for obstinate scholasticism – being, in the words of sociologist Mike Savage, so caught up in their own "class war" of trying to prove their paradigmatic approach the right one that they at times lose touch with the pressing and practical issues of inequality in contemporary society (2016: 478).

Heeding such calls for a break with paradigmatic infighting, this dissertation takes a pluralistic approach to the study of social class, arguing that we can treat different research literatures as providing *complementary* rather than competing perspectives on the nature of class inequality. I define *social classes* as being, on a basic level, segments of a population that have similar causal components determining their *life chances*, understood as their chances of gaining access to scarce and valued outcomes over the life course (Breen 2005), a definition derived from the "Weberian" strand of class research (Weber 2010). However, I simultaneously employ a broader understanding of what these "causal components" are than is typically found in Weberian theory, drawing on insights from the line of class research associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu 1987; Savage et al. 2013). Specifically, I argue that to understand how social class stratification orders the life chances of people in contemporary societies, we must disaggregate it into two constitutive dimensions: Distributive inequality and divergent structural conditioning.

2.1.1 Social Class and Resource Inequality

Social class is firstly and most intuitively a rank order sorting people by their access to valued resources (Savage et al. 2005; Kraus & Park 2017). This is probably the definition of inequality that most of us tend to draw on in everyday life when we try to make sense of the divided communities we live in – we speak of the rich and the poor, the 1% and the 99%, the haves and the have nots. Few would dispute, even in the most heated exchanges between theoretical camps, that members of any given society tend to differ in terms of resource affluence, but this consensus breaks down when we begin to ask exactly *what* resources matter. Some scholars maintain that ownership of economic capital and property is the dominant axis of inequality in all societies (Marx 1952; Wright 2000; Piketty 2014); others argue that modern class systems mostly rank people based on access to exclusive educational credentials (Collins 1979; Tomlinson & Watermeyer 2022); still others see access to marketa-

ble skills and differential capacities for skill formation as the single most important driver of contemporary inequality (Breen 2005; Cunha & Heckman 2007); and on.

These accounts may seem to posit vastly different explanations of what class stratification is, but this is only the case if we think of the resources they focus on as being entirely distinct from and incommensurable with each other. As argued in the influential framework advanced by Pierre Bourdieu, this is rarely the case – in fact, it is often possible to leverage one highly valued resource to gain access to others, or to exchange them directly for one another (Bourdieu 1986; Savage 2015). In this perspective, the most valuable resources in contemporary market economies are more akin to different forms of currency than different goods entirely – much as how a person might exchange their fortune in Euros for a fortune in Japanese Yen without great issue, a person may, given time, leverage economic wealth to acquire educational credentials, and vice versa. In this sense, the vast diversity of resource disparities documented in contemporary post-industrial societies can be said to reflect different subcomponents of an aggregate dimension of *distributive inequality*, measured in terms of overall *capital volume* or *resource affluence*[4] (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1987).

This, then, is the first dimension of the class concept that has informed the studies of this dissertation: a rank order of distributive inequality, in which those in lower ranks have diminished access to widely valued resources compared to those in higher ranks. It should be noted, here, that I include material resources such as economic wealth, cultural resources such as mastery of dominant cultural codes and behaviors (Lareau 2015; Stephens et al. 2019; Galos 2023), and social resources such as having a large and useful network of relations (Lin 2000; Savage 2015: 129ff.) as equivalent units of this dimension of overall resource affluence, following the Bourdieusian argument that these can be exchanged for one another at a fairly efficient rate (Bourdieu

[4] Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to the units involved in distributive inequality as "resources" rather than as "capitals", though the latter is usually preferred by scholars drawing on the Bourdieusian tradition of class research. This is to reflect the fact that some components of distributive inequality don't entirely conform to typical definitions of capital (i.e. being accumulative and productive, as defined by Bourdieu (1986: 93)), functioning instead like basic *capacities* such as physical and mental health, which are not productive on their own but which are necessary conditions for productive action (Currie 2009), or durable *assets* that do not accumulate or deteriorate but which grant access to profitable rents. "Resources" is used as a blanket term to cover all capitals, assets, and qualities that one may have in either greater or lesser amounts, and which can be leveraged in economic and social relations to achieve desired outcomes.

1986). This claim is supported by the empirical finding that higher-class groups in post-industrial societies rarely possess only one type of resource, but rather tend to have extensive access to all forms of valued resources (Savage et al. 2013; Friedman & Laurison 2019).[5]

2.1.2 Social Class and Corrosive Structural Conditions

However, while inequality in resources is central to understanding what social class stratification is, it is not the only form of division that class systems impose on societies. Equally important are class distinctions in the kind of *structural and environmental conditions* that people encounter on an everyday basis, and we can, in fact, see the socioeconomic ladder as a ladder of exposure to harmful and stressful conditions of existence (Pintelon et al. 2013; McEwen & McEwen 2017). There is a class gradient in exposure to many different kinds of deleterious conditions, from physical hazards such as heat strain (Flouris et al. 2018) and pollution (Currie 2009) to more diffuse and psychological risks such as employment insecurity (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2021) and ambient social conflict in one's surroundings (Sharkey & Sampson 2010). Besides having a number of corrosive effects of their own, such conditions all function as chronic stressors (Sapolsky 2004), mediating much of the well-established link between social class and poor health (Marmot 2004; Cockerham 2021: 123ff.) and harming both the present well-being and long-term life chances of those exposed to them (McEwen & McEwen 2017; Case & Deaton 2021).

At first glance, this issue may seem to overlap with the class structure of distributive inequality described above – after all, one of the primary uses of valuable resources is to secure protection from adverse conditions in life, for

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[5] It should be noted that this definition does allow that people located in the same class layer of overall resource affluence still may diverge in the *composition* of the resources they possess, identifying "class factions" that possess different sets of resources that grant advantages within different subsets of the economy and society (Bourdieu 1987; Savage et al. 2013; Flemmen et al. 2018). For the sake of analytical parsimony, I focus only on the vertical rank structure of overall resource affluence in this dissertation, while acknowledging the relevance of horizontal compositional differences within class layers. This choice was made to improve the quality of my empirical work: as will be explained further on, there are many challenges involved with conducting detailed interviews with adolescent participants, and the more complex such interviews become the more risk there is that adolescents will experience confusion and frustration during the conversation, potentially harming their willingness to disclose openly (Eder & Fingerson 2001: 4-5). To limit complexity, I presented class inequality as a unidimensional concept of greater or lesser affluence during the interviews, while simultaneously inviting participants to describe their own view of what inequality is.

instance by buying a house in a safe and well-maintained neighborhood. In fact, research within the Bourdieusian tradition tend to treat our lived conditions of existence as near synonymous with our position in social space as determined by the volume and composition of the resources we possess (Bourdieu 1987: 3-5; Savage et al. 2013). But the distinction between resource affluence and structural conditions is both conceptually and practically significant. Picture, for example, a person working as a contractor in the construction industry. In an economic upswing, this person is likely to find many opportunities for work and to enjoy a fairly high income, elevating their distributive class position. Yet at the same time, as a manual laborer, they are exposed to a far higher level of physical attrition than someone who is in the same income bracket and who lives in the same neighborhood but who is employed in a white-collar profession (Landsbergis et al. 2012; Flouris et al. 2018), affording these two people with different long-term life chances. Class distinctions in everyday conditioning experiences have widened significantly in recent times, as many Western economies have undergone a process of *labor market polarization* over the past decades (Kalleberg 2009; Kalleberg 2011), where working-class occupations have seen a decline in working conditions and employment security that many higher-class occupations have been spared (Kalleberg 2011; Standing 2021). As labor market polarization persists and expands, societies are introduced to vast class disparities in stress load and physical strain that we would miss if we only conceptualized class as a structure of resource inequality.[6] Class systems can thus be said to contain a second dimension that is partly autonomous from the first dimension of distributive inequality: A rank order of protection from corrosive structural conditions, where those in lower ranks are exposed to physical and social risk factors to a greater degree than those in higher ranks.

As indicated by these arguments, occupational systems are primary sites for the construction and reproduction of contemporary class systems as defined by these twin rank orders of distributive inequality and structural conditioning. This is true, first of all, because occupational positions to a large extent determine a person's access to many valuable resources in developed market economies (Ganzeboom et al. 1992; Oesch 2006; Connelly et al. 2016), from economic resources such as income and stock options to networks of valuable social capital. While societal elites often derive their affluence from accumulated wealth and financial assets and not from occupational rewards

[6] To illustrate this, consider that average wages among Americans without a college degree have remained level over the past decades, but job insecurity and self-reported chronic pain among people without a college degree has increased dramatically in the same period (Kalleberg 2011; Case & Deaton 2021: 89ff.).

(Huber et al. 2019), the great majority of the population in post-industrial societies are class-ordered by their position in the labor market (Breen 2005; Weeden & Grusky 2005; Oesch 2022). At the same time, selection *into* occupations is also conditional on possessing sufficient resources to make it through recruitment windows (Weeden & Grusky 2005; Stephens et al. 2014), and higher occupational positions tend to gatekeep recruits more stringently on possessing the right social connections and favored cultural codes (Rivera 2012; Friedman & Laurison 2019; Galos 2023), effectively turning occupational systems into ladders of cultural and social affluence in addition to economic affluence.

In addition to being a strong proxy for the first stratifying dimension of distributive inequality, the occupational ladder is also to a large extent a ladder of protection from adverse structural conditions. This has already been argued above, but it bears repeating that even affluent economies tend to exhibit serious occupational disparities in exposure to physical strain (Landsbergis et al. 2012), stress (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts 2012), and corrosive working conditions such as intensive use of pacing mechanisms and performance-based wages (Kalleberg 2011). For these reasons, I make use of measures of occupational stratification throughout the dissertation to operationalize class inequality, arguing that we can use a person's occupational position as the single best proxy for their distributive and structural position in society.[7] Further, occupations also tend to be highly visible and salient *symbols* of social class (Connelly et al. 2016) – symbols that young people pay a great deal of attention to, as we will see.

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[7] This is not to say that occupational measures of social class are without fault: for starters, they are ill-suited for incorporating labor market outsiders into our analyses, and they're also poor proxies of resources that are not reflected by a person's occupational position, such as inherited family wealth (Savage et al. 2005). However, occupational class measures make up for these shortcoming with several advantages. Firstly, they tend to exhibit high measurement validity, as people rarely have trouble recalling information about their job and career (Connelly et al. 2016: 2). This consideration is particular important when conducting class research among young people, as it seems safe to assume that adolescents are more likely to know what their parents do for a living than their exact income bracket. Secondly, occupational measures lend themselves well to comparative studies, owing to the increasing standardization of occupational systems in the Western world over the past century. Thus, while poverty lines and the value of educational credentials vary significantly from country to country, occupations are quite consistent predictors of life chances, at least across European economies (Oesch 2006; Oesch 2022).

2.2 Juvenile Distinctions: Encounters with Class Inequality in Adolescence

Young people are subjected to the stratified logic of class inequality from the moment they're born. Long before they become autonomous actors in society and the labor market, their life chances are formed from an early age by the social class position of their parents (Bradley & Corwyn 2002; Cunha & Heckman 2007; Cooper & Pugh 2020). In terms of the first class structure of distributive inequality, parents' resource endowments greatly condition their ability to pass on both material, social, and cultural resources to their children, resulting in durable patterns of social class reproduction in many societies, as many young people ultimately end up in class positions that are close in rank to their initial class origins (Clark 2014; Heckman & Landersø 2021). In addition to this distal effect on their long-term life chances, class inequality is also a very immediate force in the lives of young people, as societies across the world demonstrate a clear socioeconomic gradient in the physical, mental, and social well-being of children and adolescents (Currie 2009; Inchley et al. 2020). This is caused, in part, by the second class structure of structural conditioning identified above, as parents who are exposed to corrosive and demanding occupational conditions have less time and emotional energy to invest in child-rearing. This has long been evidenced by detailed ethnographic studies showing that parents in upper-middle-class positions often engage in focused cultivation of their children's talents and well-being, while parents in working-class positions often do not have the same time to engage intensively with their children's lives (Lareau 2011; Stephens et al. 2014). In addition, households ranked low on the socioeconomic ladder tend to exhibit higher levels of stress among parents, negatively impacting their ability to develop nurturing ties with their children (Bradley & Corwyn 2002: 384; McEwen & McEwen 2017).

For all these reasons, it is perhaps no great surprise that children and adolescents tend to be well aware that they live in stratified societies. As evidenced by both experimental and observational studies, even young children are fairly adept at classifying both adults and same-age peers into social class categories (Leahy 1981; Horwitz et al. 2014; Shutts et al. 2016). However, studies also consistently find that young people become more and more attentive to social class stratification over the course of maturation, and that the transition from childhood to adolescence in particular seems to be a critical period for the formation of their beliefs about inequality. Robert Leahy's classic observational studies, for instance, demonstrated that both children and adolescents were aware of conventional class disparities, but that the latter

tend to hold more elaborate and complex images of class systems than the former (Leahy 1981; Leahy 1983). Similarly, a recent study employing a novel pictorial approach to examine young people's familiarity with stereotypical class representations shows that both children and young adolescents tend to match class positions with congruent cultural signals such as clothes and occupational titles, but that their "accuracy" in making such matches increases with age (Vandebroeck 2020). Young people also become increasingly aware of their *own* position in society's socioeconomic rank order as they mature into adolescence (Peretz-Lange et al. 2022), and a series of survey studies from the United States of America demonstrate that adolescents are well aware that they live in a society segmented by class inequality, though they simultaneously tend to underestimate the extent of such inequalities (Flanagan et al. 2014; Arsenio & Willems 2017; Flanagan & Kornbluh 2019). Finally, adolescents also tend to be well aware that occupational systems reflect socioeconomic rank orders, as they hold beliefs about occupational disparities in pay and prestige that mimic the distinctly class-ordered beliefs held by most adults (Simmons & Rosenberg 1971; Dickinson 1990) – perhaps reflecting the fact that adolescence generally is a critical moment in the vocational development of young people in many cultures, where they are bombarded with information about the occupational system by parents, teachers, and counselors, and encouraged to commit as quickly as possible to a specific vocational path into the labor market (Gottfredson 1981; Kroger 2006: 70; Porfeli & Lee 2012).

All told, existing evidence suggests that young people know full well that the communities they inhabit are stratified into separate class layers, and that they seem to acquire a great deal of their formative impressions of the class system as they enter adolescence. Yet before we can begin to consider how they understand the relationship between this class ladder of socioeconomic prosperity and the status hierarchy of social esteem, we have to figure out what such status hierarchies are – and how they, too, divide us all against one another, imposing a distinctly stratified logic on society.

2.3 Status Hierarchy: Rank-Orders of Evaluation and Esteem

At its core, the concept of *status* simply reflects an individual's social standing within a given community, their relative rank as defined by the attention they garner from other community members and their general influence over how they think and behave (Cheng et al. 2013: 104). Nearly all social species have developed hierarchical forms of organization where some members hold higher status than others (Sapolsky 2004; Sapolsky 2005; Koski et al. 2015), and humans are no different: Most of the communities and organizations we

create come to exhibit a distinct rank structure over time, where some members hold greater influence and prominence than others (Magee & Galinsky 2008; Flannery & Marcus 2012; Ridgeway 2019), and a robust body of experimental evidence suggests that we respond intuitively to manipulated status differentials in groups (Halevy et al. 2011; Zitek & Tiedens 2012; Cheng et al. 2013).

The predominant form of hierarchy in the animal kingdom is the *dominance hierarchy* (Sapolsky 2005; Cummins 2006), in which the biggest and meanest members of a group coercively claim higher status ranks through brute force or aggressive coalitions with a few select allies – forcing other group members to accept the rank structure because they quite simply lack the capabilities to contest it. We humans have, however, developed an altogether different way to build durable rank structures, for the hierarchies that proliferate among us mostly tend to rely on a logic of *voluntary deference* (Anderson et al. 2015; Ridgeway 2019), in which those in lower ranks accept and even sometimes openly endorse the superior status of those in higher ranks.[8] As argued by a broad array of different literatures, we award status not to the most dominant, but to those who are perceived to be of high *social value* (Anderson et al. 2015; Haynes & Hickel 2018; Lizardo 2018; Ridgeway & Markus 2022), those who seem to possess qualities that are in alignment with the goals and preferences of our communities and who should therefore be encouraged to cultivate and exercise them. Most of our hierarchies are, in other words, built on a fundamentally pro-social logic, elevating individuals for behaving in ways that we believe serve to competently advance our collective interests (Ridgeway 2019) or embody our shared values and valorized lifestyles (Flannery & Marcus 2012; Haynes & Hickel 2018; Lizardo 2018). For that same reason, we become both psychologically and physically distressed if we believe that we hold low status in the eyes of others (Marmot 2004; Sapolsky 2004), because this communicates to us that we are seen to have little value in the communities we care about, that others believe we lack the qualities that we have been taught to honor and respect (Anderson et al. 2015).

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[8] It should be noted that dominance-based status hierarchies certainly do exist among humans (Magee & Galinsky 2008; Koski et al. 2015), but status hierarchies relying on physical or relational dominance strategies are often unstable and prone to contestation, as those who claim high ranks through brute force tend to be met with continuous disapproval and resistance from other group members (Boehm 1982; Ridgeway & Diekema 1989; Boehm 2009). Thus, it is comparatively rare to find durable rank structures in human societies that are *exclusively* based on the overt use of coercion; even autocratic tyrants seek to legitimate their dominance by clothing it in the skein of other, more socially palatable forms of hierarchy (Dukalskis & Gerschewski 2017).

We can generally establish, then, that status hierarchies in human communities and societies tends to be rank orders of differential *esteem* and *valuation*. As we will see, this notion of status as perceived social value plays a key role in how young people learn to understand the relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy, for they generally believe that those in higher class positions are more likely to possess certain widely valued qualities than those in lower class positions. These qualities can be said to reflect two things that have played a critical role in cultural constructions of social value throughout human history: Perceived competence and lifestyle distinction.

The sociological framework of *status construction theory* has long advanced the claim that societies naturally develop status orders where individuals and groups are held in different levels of esteem based on how generally *competent* and *proactive* they stereotypically are thought to be (Ridgeway & Nakagawa 2014; Ridgeway 2019). Supporting this claim is a very large body of experimental studies demonstrating that groups engaged in shared task activities mostly allocate attention, influence, and deference in proportion to the perceived competency of group members at "being good at what counts" (Ridgeway & Diekema 1989; Magee & Galinsky 2008; Cheng et al. 2013; Anderson et al. 2015), at displaying seemingly high levels of ability in the domains of skill that are symbolically salient to the group. Yet status construction theory also contends that this process of competence-based status allocation has a sinister underside, for not everyone is equally likely to have their skill and competency acknowledged. As argued by sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway, it is difficult and time-consuming to figure out the *actual* competency of any given person at any given task, and so we have learned to speed this evaluative process up by drawing on culturally available stereotypes about the *typical competence* of different social identity groups (Ridgeway 2014; Ridgeway & Markus 2022). In the view of the proponents of status construction theory, it is the proliferation of such stereotypical representations that link status hierarchy with class inequality, for many societies are host to deeply embedded stereotypes that portray lower-class identities as simple and incompetent while higher-class identities are construed as intelligent and capable (Durante et al. 2017; Durante & Fiske 2017; Fiske & Durante 2019). As long as such stereotypes are prevalent in a society, people situated in the lower reaches of the socioeconomic spectrum are likely to be perceived as having low general competence, and they will therefore be awarded less esteem and have status than those higher in the class system.

While perceptions of competence are an important component in the allocation of esteem within human communities, it is not the only basis on which status hierarchization occurs. As argued by a long line of sociological research that traces back to the foundational work of Max Weber, people socialized into

the same cultural systems intuitively and routinely evaluate each other by the degree to which they live up to shared standards for how people should look, be, and behave – specific *ways of life* or *lifestyles* (Bourdieu 1984; Chan & Goldthorpe 2004; Weber 2010: 146). It may seem strange that something so mundane as how a person lives and the practices they engage in should affect their perceived social value to others, but as argued by Weber and scholars developing on his initial arguments, groups and communities use lifestyle markers to define themselves and establish symbolic demarcations against other social identities (Bourdieu 1985; Lamont & Molnàr 2002; Weber 2010: 146), which provides group members with a sense of solidarity and belonging with one another through perceived cultural similarity (Pachucki & Breiger 2010; Fine 2012; Jenkins 2014), as well as intuitive notions of how they should strive to live in order to do well in life, which provides them with ontological security (Haynes & Hickel 2018). In this view, all societies contain a great plurality of interpersonal and symbolic communities that function as "status cultures" (Weber 2010; Valentino 2022) or "social fields" (Bourdieu 1984), and people who are encultured into the same communities allocate esteem to one another based on their ability to display *valorized lifestyle characteristics*, defined broadly as values, skills, habits, and worldviews (Lizardo 2018).

Yet while community-specific status cultures exist simultaneously with one another, they are not placed on equal footing in the public culture that characterizes society as a whole. Pierre Bourdieu argued, famously, that communities compete with one another to establish status hierarchies *between* their distinct lifestyle subcultures so that some are held in greater general esteem than others, and that these contests typically are won by communities with greater access to economic, cultural, and social resources (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1985; Bourdieu 1989) – effectively constructing a powerful link between class inequality in resource affluence and status hierarchies of lifestyle distinction. A large body of research supports this claim, showing that contemporary Western societies are host to clear and commonly accepted status gradients in a wide array of lifestyle practices (Jæger et al. 2023), and a pronounced level of class stratification in access to the most widely valued practices (Friedman & Kuipers 2013; Jarness 2015; Jæger et al. 2023). All told, this perspective argues that esteem is allocated to those who can display lifestyle traits that are valued in dominant public culture, which tends to be lifestyles that are "designated by their rarity as distinguished" (Bourdieu 1984: 171) and which typically require significant resources to access.

The claims advanced by these two theoretical camps may seem to be at odds with each other: After all, one argues that esteem is allocated to those who seemingly display high levels of *competence*, while the other claims that esteem is granted to those who display *lifestyle distinction*. It should be noted,

however, that these are not mutually exclusive explanations – both may well be involved in the construction of status hierarchies at the same time. As we will see further into the dissertation, Danish adolescents indeed seem to think that displays of competence, in the form of intellectual ability or personal agency, and displays of lifestyle affluence are equally viable ways of gaining status, and that people in higher class positions generally excel in both while people in lower class positions are deficient in them.

For this reason, I conceptualize status hierarchy in an open-ended fashion that does not foreground any one theoretical position. I define status hierarchy as a rank order of social value and esteem which is allocated to individuals and groups based on the degree to which they are perceived to display traits that are currently valued in their shared public culture. In contemporary Western societies, status hierarchies mainly rank individuals and groups based on their perceived competence and lifestyle distinction, but I argue that we should see the cultural valuation of traits as context sensitive, so that different traits may be elevated as status markers across time and space. The dissertation should be seen as an attempt to investigate how European adolescents *currently* make sense of the relationship between social class and social status, but it may not capture how they will understand the class-status linkage in the future. Culture is constantly evolving, as are the status hierarchies that emerge from it.

2.4 Status Sensitivity in Adolescence

Adolescents are no strangers to the evaluative ways of status hierarchization. In fact, a growing consensus in developmental psychology suggests that adolescence is a critical period for sensitivity to *social influence* (Blakemore & Mills 2014; Powers et al. 2022) and *social evaluation* (Sebastian et al. 2010; Blakemore 2018), two of the key processes that, as argued above, are involved in the construction of status hierarchies. This has been demonstrated by a great number of sophisticated experiments and neurological studies, but we also see it expressed quite clearly in how adolescents behave in everyday life. When we look at relational dynamics within communities of same-age peers, for instance, we find that children mainly focus on gaining *peer acceptance* by building horizontal ties of friendship with one another (Coie & Dodge 1983; Giordano 2003), while adolescents primarily fixate on gaining *peer popularity* by building vertical ties of dominance and esteem (Cillessen & Rose 2004; Mayeux et al. 2011; Van den Berg et al. 2020). Many adolescents even prioritize the pursuit of popularity and status over maintaining horizontal ties, as they are willing to sacrifice friendships to protect their popularity (Logis et al. 2013) and often seek to build ties with peers that rise in status rank (Dijkstra

et al. 2010). Further, studies show that this tendency to prioritize status over all other peer relations is most pronounced in mid adolescence while levelling off in late adolescence[9] (LaFontana & Cillessen 2011), suggesting that it indeed is a developmental trend that is partly driven by the physiological and cognitive changes that young people experience in this tempestuous phase of life.

Adolescents thus demonstrate intense sensitivity to hierarchies at the peer level, but they are also greatly preoccupied with status dynamics among adults – and with their own position in them. A long line of research in developmental psychology highlights that young people become increasingly concerned with "individuation" as they enter adolescence (Erickson 1968; Kroger 2006), with becoming autonomous persons with distinct identities and a will of their own. As part of this individuation process, adolescents often begin to pursue a social goal of becoming less submissive and subordinate in relations with both same-age peers and with adults (Trucco et al. 2014; Blakemore 2018). These attempts to gain parity with adults often result in clashes with authority figures when these treat adolescents as dependents that they should guide and direct (Meeus 1988). Weary parents struggling with turbulent teenagers sometimes think that their offspring are uniquely stubborn and frustrating to deal with, but most of the time their unruly adolescents are just as disagreeable as their peers – and while some acts of teenage rebellion can be rather counterproductive, they are often motivated by a desire for worth and valuation, by a need to be being taken seriously as an autonomous individual who should be treated as an equal.

Because adolescents are so sensitive to the flows of esteem around them, they are also quite attentive to status hierarchies that prevail in society at large. We see this demonstrated, for instance, in the cultural consumption of adolescents, as they tend to gravitate towards branded consumer goods that hold high status (Isaksen & Roper 2008; Shim 2011) – a tendency that cultural producers often capitalize on and exploit in their marketing practices (Isaksen

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[9] Adolescence is, by nature, a fuzzy developmental period that is difficult to demarcate, in part because young people vary quite a lot in when they enter puberty and when they reach full bodily maturity (Blakemore 2018), and in part because cultures vary in how they understand and organize adolescence as a period in life (Choudury 2010). However, developmental psychologists generally work with a tripartite definition segmented into "early adolescence" spanning the preteen years to around age 15, "mid adolescence" spanning from age 15 to 17, and "late adolescence" (also frequently referred to as "early adulthood") spanning from 17 to the early 20's (Kroger 2006; Blakemore 2018). Throughout this dissertation, I am primarily referring to young people in the phase of "mid adolescence" when I refer to "adolescents" as a general category.

& Roper 2012). Similarly, adolescents also believe that specific lifestyle practices such as diets and health behaviors are held in different levels of status in society as a whole, and they further associate the least prestigious of such behaviors with low socioeconomic positions (Fielding-Singh 2019). Finally, young people are also routinely exposed to stereotypes that associate different social identities with different levels of competence (Sigelman 2012), and studies show that adolescents in contemporary European countries often internalize class-stereotypical representations that portray occupational systems as ladders of intelligence and capability (Dickinson 1990; Jonsson & Beach 2015). It would seem, in other words, that young people in Western societies pay a great deal attention to the perceived competence and lifestyle distinction of different class positions – but whether this leads them to believe that social class and social status are linked with one another is uncertain.

Addressing this uncertainty is the primary objective of this dissertation, and to do so, we must take a close look at how adolescents maturing into contemporary European societies make sense of the relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy. But before we can dive into this empirical investigation, we must first consider a number of methodological issues and challenges standing in the way.

Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations

And books that told me
everything about the wasp, except why.
- Dylan Thomas, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*

Now that we've considered the theoretical underpinnings of social class and social status as general concepts, we are almost ready to investigate how young people understand them. These twin systems of stratification are not, ultimately, abstract and intangible ideas existing only in the convoluted debates of scholars – they are deeply real phenomena, saturating the social world we all navigate on a daily basis. They bound what we can and will experience, shaping both our long-term life chances and the minutiae of our everyday lives. This may be so obvious a point that it may seem unnecessary to point it out: We all have some familiarity with the manifold nuances of socioeconomic distinctions and social hierarchies – we know intuitively that someone who lives in a mansion most likely wakes up to a rather different life than someone who wakes up in a small one-bedroom apartment, and that the leader of an organization most likely garners more attention and esteem when they walk into a room than when an intern does. Yet because we encounter the signs and traces of social class and social status so routinely, we often find it surprisingly difficult to make sense of them.

In survey research, for instance, most respondents have no trouble with placing themselves in abstract socioeconomic rank orders and on ladders of self-perceived social status (Goodman et al. 2001; Rubin et al. 2014; Stubager & Harrits 2022), finding it intuitive that such systems of stratification characterize the communities they live in – but they simultaneously tend to be quite inaccurate in guessing their actual, objective positions in these rank orders (Bellani et al. 2021). Similarly, a number of experimental studies show that people from a broad array of societies intuitively classify their fellow citizens by their objective social class (Varnum 2013; Stubager et al. 2018), and that they in most cases guess correctly at an above chance rate (Bjornsdottir & Rule 2017; Kraus et al. 2017). Yet at the same time, many people find it uncomfortable and difficult to discuss class distinctions openly in face-to-face interactions such as qualitative interviews (Faber 2010; Irwin 2018), and they often resolve this tension by insisting that they and most everyone else belong to one great, undifferentiated "middle class" (Faber 2010; Sherman 2017; Kostet et al. 2021). In much the same way, many people indicate that they perceive

social status differentials in the communities they interact with on a daily basis, but experimental research simultaneously shows that we mostly respond to status signals unconsciously (Ridgeway & Markus 2022: 14), and that we often react negatively when we witness attempts to establish overtly hierarchical and dominant relations (Boehm 1982; Ridgeway & Diekema 1989). All told, past studies make it clear that while people tend to hold ambiguous and ambivalent views of class inequality and social status hierarchy, they are very much capable of apprehending these two phenomena and of forming rich impressions of them – and it is exactly these impressions that I set out to examine in this dissertation.

In this chapter, I reflect on some of the methodological challenges that are inherent to investigating the dynamics of social class and social status, and I present the steps I have taken to resolve these challenges. In addition, I also outline many of the difficulties involved in conducting research with adolescents, who, as we will see, can be quite a tricky group to work with.

3.1 Studying Status: Behavioral and Interpretive Approaches

As defined in the previous chapter, social status hierarchies are rank orders of differential esteem and valuation, where higher levels of perceived value grants greater prominence and influence in social relations. In this sense, status is a phenomenon that emerges out of two constituent processes (Ridgeway 2019: 8): *evaluation*, reflecting the subjective impressions that we form of others and the social value we believe they hold; and *prominence*, reflecting the behaviors of heightened attention and deference we knowingly or unknowingly display towards those who we believe hold high value. In any given moment where status hierarchies are apprehended, these two processes occur on multiple levels (Ridgeway & Markus 2022: 7-8): In the personal psychology of the actors involved, in the interpersonal understandings and arrangements emerging between them, and in the abstract group-level relations that these interpersonal encounters perform and reinforce.

Scholars attempting to understand the complex dynamics of social status have developed a sophisticated toolbox of methods for studying and measuring these two critical processes. One commonly used approach is to focus exclusively on the behavioral imprints of status, as some researchers argue that we can treat the allocation of attention and influence within interactions as a near perfect reflection of the intrapersonal evaluative processes that result in such differential prominence (Zitek & Tiedens 2012; Koski et al. 2015). While this approach is most commonly found within behavioral psychology, it also

forms a central assumption in sociological work drawing on the theory of symbolic interactionism, with one example being the studies of Erving Goffman and his claim that it is in *interactions* that social relations and meanings emerge, develop, and matter (Goffman 1990: 231ff). In this view, if we are interested in learning what status hierarchies characterize a given community or society, we need to look at how status is allocated in *practice*, in the subtle distribution of attention and deference between people who stand face to face with one another.

Another approach argues, however, that we cannot always assume that what people do in a given moment is a good reflection of what they think and feel – and that we might seriously misjudge their inner evaluative sentiments by only looking at how they behave in bounded, contingent situations (Cerulo 2014; Lamont & Swidler 2014: 159). In this view, we only increase the "interpretive gap" between ourselves and the people we are interested in by studying them externally and projecting our own meanings onto what they say and do (Pugh 2013) – an issue that we can remedy by including their subjective accounts in our analyses (Bourdieu 1989). In addition, by examining how people subjectively make sense of social status hierarchies, we can go beyond asking what hierarchies they construct and gain insight into *why* they construct them, by studying which criteria of evaluation they have learned to draw on when allocating esteem (Lamont 2000: 4).

Some scholars argue that the only way to bridge the gap between these two approaches is by combining both external measures of status (e.g. the allocation of attention in interactions) with subjective measures (e.g. self-reported allocation of attention and esteem), studying how people interact with one another while asking them to describe their status perceptions after the fact (Cheng et al. 2013). I take a different approach in this dissertation, as I argue that we can gain insight into both the evaluative and the behavioral component of society's dominant status hierarchies by studying the *status beliefs* of people who have been encultured into these societies. As defined previously, our status beliefs are durable impressions of which traits, behaviors, and identities *most people* in a given community or society find worthy of esteem and attention.[10] We form and update these beliefs inferentially whenever we expe-

[10] It should be noted that the conventional definition of status beliefs, formulated and advanced by Cecilia Ridgeway, claims that they capture our impressions of which traits, behaviors, and identities most people associate with *competence*, and therefore, in the view of status construction theory, with esteem and status (Ridge-

rience status hierarchies, consciously or unconsciously taking note of how esteem is distributed and on what grounds (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway & Correll 2006), and we can thus see the status beliefs we hold at any given moment as a product of all the behavioral status interactions we have experienced up to that point. At the same time, we draw routinely on our stored status beliefs whenever we are prompted to engage in evaluative processes, as they influence how we are likely to allocate esteem by forming our basic notion of how esteem is *usually* allocated (Ridgeway 2019: 74), to the point that we often end up acting in accordance with society's dominant status hierarchies even without noticing it and even if we do not personally endorse them (Ridgeway & Markus 2022: 10).

Put briefly, by studying the status beliefs that people have formed, we can form an impression not only of the behavioral status interactions they have experienced and internalized, but also of the evaluative schemas that are likely to guide how they will allocate esteem in future status interactions. We can, in a sense, see the status beliefs that proliferate among members of a society as the shadow cast by that society's dominant status hierarchies on their personal psychologies, the inscription of public culture into the personal culture of individual citizens (Lizardo 2017; Valentino & Vaisey 2022). This is likely to hold for adolescents as well, who, as I argued in chapter 1, are very attentive to behavioral signals of status (Lansu et al. 2014) and who are quick to internalize and mimic them (Willis 2003; Brown 2011; Sandstrom 2011). In the studies I have conducted in this dissertation, I attempt to gain insight into the status beliefs of adolescents via two distinct analytical methods.

In paper A and paper B, I make use of detailed semi-structured interviews to form an inductive impression of the status beliefs that adolescents have internalized. Here, I develop on prior studies probing the status beliefs of individuals, which have relied on survey methodology to query the status beliefs of participants in experiments and panels with seven-point semantic differential items measuring how they believe "most people" rate the status of persons and groups (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway & Correll 2006). While this approach has provided a great deal of insight into how status beliefs develop and function, it gives us only an indirect glimpse into the evaluative criteria that people have learned to follow when allocating esteem, making it somewhat opaque *why* they've formed the specific set of status beliefs they carry with them. In my first two studies, I attempt to circumvent this issue by querying

way 2019: 61). I have adapted this definition to fit the more open-ended conceptualization of status hierarchy that I employ in this dissertation, which allows that status evaluations can be based on more than perceived competence.

the status beliefs of my study participants with open-ended and extended interview questions, providing the participants with ample time to access their stored beliefs and using probes to guide them towards providing rich explanatory accounts of why they hold these beliefs (Brinkman & Kvale 2015; Lareau 2021). In adapting the study of status beliefs to interview methodology, I draw heavily on past research that has demonstrated the utility of semi-structured interviews for accessing the beliefs that people have formed about standards of worth in their communities (Sennett & Cobb 1972; Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000; Lamont & Swidler 2014).

In addition to examining these open evaluative processes, the dissertation also investigates how adolescents express their status beliefs through their *occupational aspirations*. An occupational aspiration reflects what a person sees as their ideal vocational position at any given moment (Gottfredson 1981: 548), and such aspirations emerge out of a lengthy evaluative process where young people appraise available occupational alternatives based on how these are stereotypically construed in their sociocultural environments (Gottfredson & Lapan 1997; Porfeli & Lee 2012). We can, in other words, see the occupational aspirations of young people as a powerful reflection of the both the behavioral and the evaluative components of their status beliefs, as these aspirations have been shaped by past experiences where they've witnessed some occupational identities being awarded more esteem than others (Gottfredson 1981), and as they personally confer esteem to the occupations they aspire towards while denying esteem to occupations they reject (Simmons & Morris 1974; Dickinson 1990). Finally, occupational aspirations are an ideal window into the status beliefs of young people quite simply because most adolescents spend a great deal of time thinking about their future position in the labor market. Adolescence is treated as a key juncture for vocational development in a broad array of societies (Kroger 2006: 70; Porfeli & Lee 2012), and many young people are bombarded with information and impressions about the occupational system from the moment they enter adolescence. Yet such information is rarely neutral, but instead tends to carry powerful stereotypes and value connotations, informing adolescents that some occupational identities are commonly considered to be more impressive and remarkable than others (Simmons & Morris 1974; Dickinson 1990; Jonsson & Beach 2015).

In paper C, I investigate whether we see traces of a class gradient in status and esteem in the occupational aspirations of adolescents by making use of a comparative statistical analysis, examining the aspirations of young people from four European countries. In this study, I seek to complement the detailed individual-level findings from my interview studies with a bird's-eye view of how entire cohorts of adolescents construe and construct occupational status hierarchies. By combining methods and levels of analysis in this way, I attempt

to test the validity of my findings through convergent triangulation (Jick 1979), allowing me to gauge whether the patterns I detect with one method also emerge when we examine them from another angle.

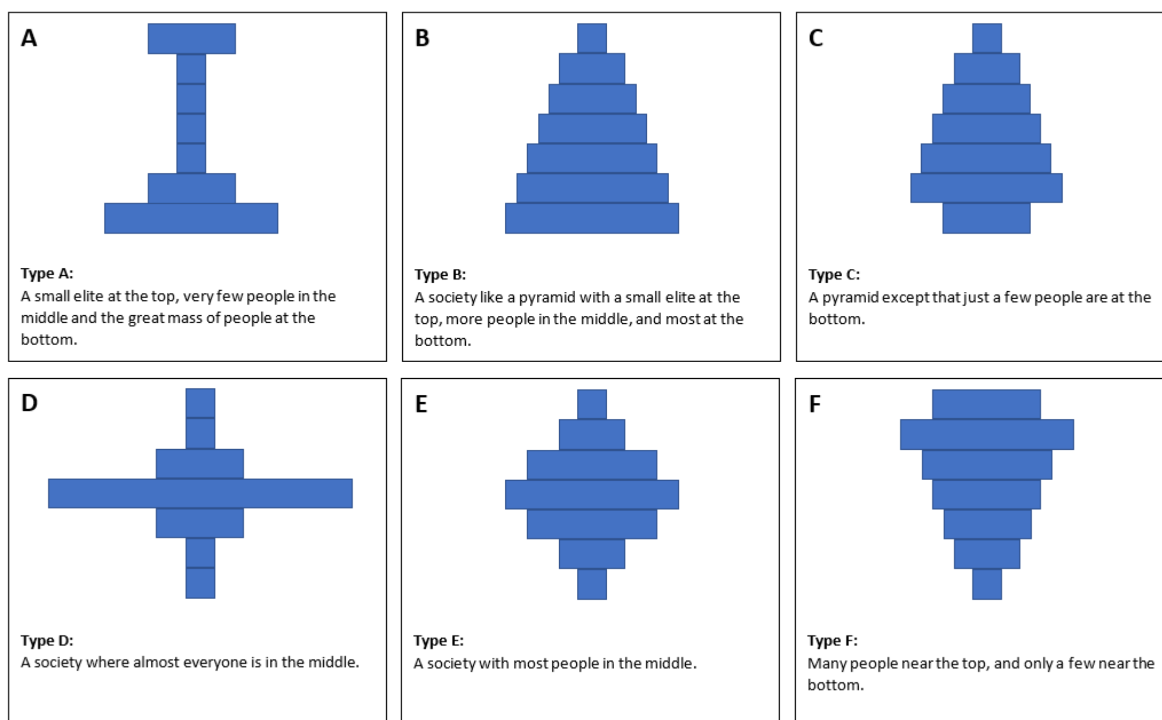
3.2 Studying Class: Querying Subjective Perceptions of Inequality

The arguments presented above make it clear that we can gain insight into how young people understand the status hierarchies that dominate their societies by examining their internalized status beliefs. Yet the purpose of this dissertation is not to chart the full universe of status beliefs that adolescents in a given society may form, but rather to examine whether they come to believe that status is distributed unequally across this society's socioeconomic class ladder. To examine this, we must investigate how their status beliefs intersect with the mental models they hold of class inequality.

Fortunately, a vast and rich research literature has developed around studying the subjective impressions that people form of the class systems that surround them (Rubin et al. 2014; Irwin 2018; Harrits & Helboe 2018; Stubager et al. 2018), and as outlined in the previous chapter, similar research has been conducted into the inequality perceptions of young people. A large body of evidence shows that by the time they reach adolescence, young people have formed detailed impressions of the class systems they are embedded in – and it is these impressions that we must access and query if we wish to learn how they make sense of the interaction between social class and social status.

To that end, the dissertation makes use of a technique first pioneered by psychological researcher Constance Flanagan and her colleagues. To examine how young people in the United States of America perceive and make sense of socioeconomic inequality, Flanagan and her team adapted a pictorial instrument used to measure inequality perceptions in the International Social Survey Programme. As depicted in figure 1 below, this instrument depicts a number of different resource distributions that might characterize a society, ranging from a highly unequal society (distribution A) to a highly egalitarian one (distribution F). Employing this instrument in a number of survey studies, Flanagan reports it to be an efficient and reliable measure for querying the inequality perceptions of young people and for prompting them to produce open-ended accounts regarding the nature and causes of inequality (Flanagan 2013: 134ff; Flanagan et al. 2014; Flanagan & Kornbluh 2019).

Figure 1: Class Distributions Presented to Interview Participants



Building on Flanagan's work, I made use of the distributions shown in figure 1[11] to bring class inequality into the interviews utilized as data for paper A and paper B, albeit with one alteration: In addition to the five models shown in the original instrument from ISSP, I introduced model D as an alternate variant of what an egalitarian society might look like. Model D was added to adapt the instrument to the culture of Danish society that my interviews were embedded in, for prior studies have found that most Danish citizens self-identify as middle class (Stubager & Harrits 2022), and that they tend to see the middle class as the "normal category" that best represents the average Dane (Faber 2010; Harrits 2018). The pictorial instrument functioned as an efficient "set piece" in the interviews that refocused the attention of the participants as the topic of conversation pivoted from their own lives and school environments to more abstract questions relating to the class structure of their society, while also giving them agency to define this class structure on their own terms. The approach I took was to "treat the interviewee as a teacher" (Brinkman & Kvale 2015: 113), inviting them to educate *me* about the nature of class inequality in Danish society while I simply listened and provided short encouraging remarks to signal that I was interested in- and impressed by their descriptions, and by asking them to describe people located in different positions of their

[11] Note that the figures and the accompanying explanatory texts were presented in Danish during the interviews.

chosen distribution. All told, this technique proved to be an effective way to establish a shared understanding between interviewer and interviewees about what was meant whenever references were made to “inequality” – an understanding I leveraged to query the participants’ beliefs about the interaction between social class and social status, by asking whether the specific class images they had provided were related to the allocation of esteem in society.[12]

While I worded queries related to the class perceptions of the interview participants as direct “what do *you* think” questions, the questions related to their beliefs about the interaction between class and status were instead worded as indirect “what do you think that *most people* think” questions,[13] This approach was taken firstly to ensure that I queried the participants’ third-order status beliefs – the impressions they had formed of the evaluative *consensus* in Danish society (Ridgeway 2019: 74) – rather than their personal boundary work, and secondly to minimize the risk of activating a *social desirability bias* in their responses. Status hierarchies are inherently controversial topics, for evaluation and ranking of individuals and groups always implies some level of social *conflict* over who is favored and who is not, and interview participants may thus try to provide what they think is a socially accepted and expected answer to avoid confrontation and discomfort in the interview situation (Bergen & Labonté 2020). This is especially likely to be an issue in interviews conducted with people encultured into the public culture of Danish society, which is often said to be highly uncomfortable with acknowledging explicit social divisions within the cultural majority group (Faber 2010). The shift from direct to indirect questions employed in this study can to some extent mitigate the issue of social desirability bias, by letting interviewees speak about controversial subjects without feeling like their answers reflect on them as individuals but rather on society as a whole (Bergen & Labonté 2020). Yet even so, social desirability bias is inherent to interview methodology and can

[12] I generally made use of two approaches for examining how they made sense of the interaction between social class and social status: First, I pointed to the specific model in figure 1 they had chosen, and asked whether people in the higher end of this distribution tended to have higher status than people in the middle and the lower end; and second, I asked whether the specific class markers they had mentioned were related to society’s dominant status hierarchy (e.g. “You mentioned that people in the higher end of society often live in huge houses. Do you think that the kind of house you live in matters for how much respect you get from others in society? Like, do people respect someone who lives in a mansion more than someone who lives in a housing block, or is that not something that matters a lot?”)

[13] A typical example: “Do you think that, like, the layer of society a person is in, does that matter for how they’re treated by others? So if you’re from the higher end or the lower end, would you be treated the same way, or differently?”

never fully be circumvented. It is something that we need to keep in mind as we consider the findings from paper A and paper B and evaluate their validity.

Finally, in addition to studying how adolescents subjectively make sense of class inequality as a rank order in society, paper C investigates how young people envision *their own position* in this rank order, by examining which segment of the class ladder they aspire towards with their occupational aspirations. To accomplish this, respondents' self-reported occupational aspirations were coded into occupational standard categories in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08), which were subsequently assigned scores on from the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI-08).[14] The International Socio-Economic Index is a well-validated measure of occupational stratification which ranks all occupational groups in ISCO by a single continuous scale reflecting the average income and length of education of people actively working in that group across a broad array of societies (Ganzeboom et al. 1992; Ganzeboom 2010). While individual countries may have occupational class systems in place that differ from the ranking of occupations in ISEI, the index does provide an accurate image of the *average* occupational class system in developed, post-industrial countries (Ganzeboom et al. 1992; Connelly et al. 2016: 7), making it a particularly useful measure for comparative studies. Importantly, the designers of ISEI have confirmed that an updated version of the scale fits well with the occupational rank systems found in most European countries (Ganzeboom 2010), making it a valid measure for the data analyzed in paper C.

3.3 Studying Adolescents: The Trials and Triumphs of Working with Teenagers

If we wish to gain insight into how young people make sense of social class and social status, we need to take into consideration a number of methodological obstacles that are inherent to conducting research with adolescent participants. This is not because adolescents are any less reflective or insightful than adults – they are, in fact, highly attentive to the social world they live in (Choudhury 2010) and they often long for opportunities to discuss their experiences and ideas (Eder & Fingerson 2001). But there are two fundamental challenges involved in conducting empirical research with young participants, challenges that I sought to mitigate in a number of ways throughout my studies.

[14] It should be noted that this coding procedure was conducted by the designers of the dataset I use in paper C, *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU)*, and not by me.

3.3.1 Dealing with Asymmetry

A first issue is that there is a fundamental *power asymmetry* between adult researchers and adolescent participants (Eder & Fingerson 2001; Heath et al. 2009), an asymmetry that exists no matter the methodologies we apply, but which becomes particularly obvious and salient when conducting qualitative research involving face-to-face interactions with study participants such as the interview studies employed in paper A and paper B of this dissertation. This power asymmetry follows from the fact that adults and adolescents hold very different positions in society: Adolescents are popularly viewed as immature, irrational, and vulnerable, while adults are viewed as capable and autonomous, and young people experience this division of social and symbolic roles every day in interactions with parents (Lareau 2011) and adult authorities at school (Bruch & Soss 2018). It is likely that adolescents knowingly or unknowingly assume that a similar relationship will exist between them and an adult interviewer – especially when the interviewer is a stranger, and a credentialed, highly educated stranger to boot (Eder & Fingerson 2001). A successful interview relies on establishing some level of intimacy and trust between interviewer and interviewee to facilitate honest and detailed disclosure (Lareau 2021: 63), and power differentials often hinder the development of confidentiality and rapport in the interview situation (Brinkman & Kvale 2015: 99), so this issue is one that must be addressed to produce valid interview data with adolescent participants.

During the field work I conducted in my interview studies, I took a number of steps to diminish the power asymmetry between myself and the young people I worked with. Following the guidelines provided by Eder & Fingerson (2001: 7), I first of all made a point of spending time with the study participants outside the interview situation, so that they might familiarize themselves with me and feel less uncertain about the relationship between us during the interviews. Here, I spent time chatting and doing activities with adolescents who would eventually be recruited as interview participants, adolescents who already had participated in interviews, and adolescents who had no interest in participating but who still wanted to socialize. This aspect of my field work should not be confused with a full ethnographic study, in part because I only spent limited time[15] on these informal interactions, and in part because I did not treat the interactions as systematic data collection, e.g. by taking detailed field notes.[16] Instead, my focus was only on building rapport

[15] As a rule, I spent one recess period on associating informally with the adolescents at each school I visited per school visit.

[16] It should be noted that I did still take field notes of particularly salient interactions that seemed directly relevant to the primary research question of the dissertation.

with participants and potential participants to enhance the quality of my interview study.

As a second attempt to decrease the power asymmetry between myself and my study participants, I followed the advice of Lareau (2021: 68) and Heath et al. (2009) and brought gifts, specifically snacks and candy, to distribute during my field work. As argued by Lareau (2021: 68ff) and Limerick et al. (1996), data collection in interview studies is fundamentally about reciprocity and exchange: Participants expend a great deal of time and energy to produce rich accounts of their lives during interviews, and if interviewers do not reciprocate by providing valuable goods in exchange, the asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee tends to widen. By bringing snacks along and distributing them freely to participants and non-participants alike, I sought to compensate the young people I worked with for their time and for any disruption to their lives that my field work might cause.[17] However, I elected to reciprocate with snacks instead of monetary rewards because, as argued by Heath et al. (2009: 37), monetary gifts from adult researchers to juvenile participants may enhance feelings of asymmetry rather than diminish them, as they may remind young people that they are economically subordinate to- and dependent on adults in most aspects of their lives.[18]

Finally, I also attempted to diminish power asymmetries *within* the interviews in a number of ways. First, I followed the best practices outlined by Eder & Fingerson (2001) and gave the interview participants as much agency as possible over how, when, and where the interviews would be conducted. I gave the participants full control over which time and which day their interview would take place, and negotiated with teachers and school leaders to let the interviews take place during school hours if this was preferred by the individual participant. Further, all interview participants were given the option of bringing friends along if they wished, and a total of 10 out of 33 participants were interviewed in groups while the remaining preferred to be interviewed on their own (meaning that, out of a total of 27 interviews, 4 were conducted

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One example of this is the interaction I report with "Isabella" in paper A, where she told me a story in which she constructs a powerful class-based status differential while we sat and ate snacks together.

[17] I also brought chocolates as gifts to all teachers and school leaders I worked with during my field work, to thank them for the time and resources they had expended to facilitate my study. I only brought these gifts at the tail end of my field work at each school, so that they would not be perceived as an attempt to buy access but instead as a sign of gratitude for cooperation.

[18] In addition to this concern, Lareau (2021: 68) argues that foodstuffs make excellent interview gifts as they provide a natural opportunity to share a meal and an informal interaction with study participants.

as group interviews and the remainder as solo interviews). In addition, I elected for as open and informal an interview style as possible to avoid activating the "education mindset" of the participants (Heath et al. 2009: 82), i.e. the script of providing formal and closed responses to adult authorities that they learn to adopt within school institutions (Eder & Fingerson 2001: 4). More specifically, I designed the interviews to incorporate humorous segments and moments of self-disclosure from me so that I would appear as less of an authority figure (Bergen & Labonté 2020), and I spent up to a third of each interview asking openly about the personal lives and hobbies of the participants, letting them take the lead in the conversation while I listened and asked with interest about the things they cared about. All told, this approach proved quite successful at establishing a relationship of greater parity within the interview situation, which ultimately ensured that the interviews produced richer and more valid data.

3.3.2 Dealing with Complexity

A second issue to consider when conducting research with young people is that they generally speaking have a more limited attention span than full adults. This should by no means be taken to mean that children and adolescents do not have rich and reflective inner lives – it is simply a reflection of the fact that their cognitive development is still ongoing, so they tend to have greater difficulty processing abstract and complex information than adults who have reached full cognitive maturity (Choudhury et al. 2006; Blakemore 2018). For this reason, scholars conducting studies with young participants advocate the use of research designs that are not dependent on rapid processing of complicated and multi-faceted instruments (Shaw et al. 2011: 20ff), and a common approach is to eschew designs based on discursive queries in favor of pictorial measures that can be apprehended visually and intuitively (Flanagan et al. 2014; Vandebroeck 2020; Vandebroeck & Jappens 2022).

A large body of qualitative research shows, however, that young people tend to be familiar with discursive modes of reflection and inquiry by the time they reach early adolescence (Heath et al. 2009), and that most adolescents are capable of participating meaningfully in semi-structured interviews (Eder & Fingerson 2001: 10-11). At the same time, it is still important to take steps to avoid overloading them with excess complexity during the interview situation – in part because this may prime them to think that they have to respond "the right way" to the interviewer's questions, activating their "education mindset" (Heath et al. 2009: 82).

In order to safeguard against this issue in my interview study, I avoided all use of academic or technical jargon during conversations with participants

and replaced abstract concepts with simple explanations of what the concepts involve. I also employed a strategy of parroting the language employed by the interview participants (Brinkman & Kvale 2015: 179) – so if one participant referred to social status as "being cool" then I did so as well, and if another referred to status as "getting respect" then I did the same.[19] This strategy was supported by the open and inductive nature of many of the questions in my interview guide (see appendix 1 of paper A and paper B for the full interview guide), which prompted the participants to take the lead at multiple junctions in the interview and let them define the tone and style of the language used (Eder & Fingerson 2001: 4).

In addition, I elected to query their perceptions of only one aspect of class stratification: The vertical dimension of distributive inequality. This choice was made partly so that I could make use of the pictorial instrument shown in figure 1 above, and partly to limit the complexity that the interview participants would have to contend with when class inequality was introduced to the conversation. As a result of this choice, paper A and B provide rich insight into how adolescents understand the class dimension of distributive inequality, but at the cost of providing limited insight into how they understand horizontal differentiation into class factions and the dimension of structural conditioning described in chapter 2. I did, however, deem this to be a necessary trade-off to ensure that the interviews produced high-quality data – with the hope that future studies may uncover the bits of the puzzle that I left behind.

3.4 Reflections on Cases and Contexts

A last thing to consider is the *case context* for the studies outlined above. The research question investigated in this dissertation, how adolescents make sense of the interaction between social class and social status, is phrased as a general inquiry that one could in theory examine anywhere, and one may be tempted to think that the answer to this question also may be the same across different contexts. Yet we should never forget the fact that the findings our inquiries produce always carry traces of the environments that they were conducted in – a fact that we need to bear in mind when interpreting the implications of these findings (Soss 2018). Two levels of case context are particularly salient to the studies covered in this dissertation: The macro-level of the national cultures and economies that all study participants were embedded in,

[19] It should be noted, however, that I generally did not use contemporary slang in the interviews unless the participants employed it, to avoid the risk of seeming like I was trying to "play cool", because nothing makes a teenager cringe more than an adult who thinks they're "one of the kids".

and the meso-level of the specific school environments that the interview participants were situated in.

3.4.1 Country Cases

Any examination of the dynamics of social class and social status in a given society will be sensitive to the exact class system and status hierarchies that exists in this society. While practically all societies currently existing are structured into socioeconomic rank orders (Chancel et al. 2022), the exact nature of the rank order in place does tend to vary depending on each society's cultural system (Kraus et al. 2013; Stephens et al. 2014), institutional landscape (Esping-Andersen 1990; Kalleberg 2011), and technological basis (Acemoglu 2002). Similarly, while the two evaluative criteria of competence and lifestyle distinction appear to form the basis of status hierarchies in a wide array of contexts (Chan & Goldthorpe 2004; Durante et al. 2017; Ridgeway 2019; Jæger et al. 2023), the perceived competence and lifestyle distinction of specific traits, behaviors, and identities is ultimately a product of cultural negotiation and thus may vary markedly across countries.

In paper A and paper B, I zoom in on one specific national case: Denmark. This may, at first glance, strike readers as an odd choice for investigating issues related to stratification, for Denmark is popularly known to be a highly egalitarian country, both in economic, institutional, and cultural terms.[20] This is not an entirely unfounded reputation: Denmark has one of the lowest levels of post-tax income inequality in the world (OECD 2015), and its welfare state was built on a principle of state-sponsored universalism (Esping-Andersen 1990) meant to provide broad public access to higher education and most healthcare services. Recent studies have found, however, that Danish society still demonstrates a significant level of class stratification, as the country is host to pronounced inequalities in educational credentials (Heckman & Landersø 2021) and economic wealth (OECD 2021). Further, while post-tax income inequality in Denmark remains comparatively low, it has been increasing steadily over the past three decades (Pareliussen et al. 2018).

All these factors indicate that Denmark is relevant as a case for examining how young people might make sense of stratification, but equally important is the question of how the structure and culture of Danish society might shape

[20] One example is the American left-wing activist and politician Bernie Sanders, who often refers to Denmark to as a model country for those who aspire to build egalitarian societies, stating: "[Danes] have gone a long way to ending the enormous anxieties that comes with economic insecurity. Instead of promoting a system which allows a few to have enormous wealth, they have developed a system which guarantees a strong minimal standard of living to all." (Moody 2016)

the impressions that adolescents form of social class and social status. One possibility, here, is that the relatively low level of economic inequality in Denmark may render Danish adolescents less likely to perceive class as a rank order of resource affluence than young people in more unequal societies might. Experimental studies find, however, that Danish adults are just as likely to draw on class categories to classify themselves and their fellow citizens as adults in countries with greater absolute inequality (Stubager et al. 2018; Evans et al. 2022), and that they perform this sorting largely based on income and occupational labels (Stubager et al. 2018; Stubager & Harrits 2022), as well as on the price and exclusivity of their preferred lifestyle practices (Jæger et al. 2023). The same may well be true for Danish adolescents, so we should not assume that they will be any less capable of picking up the signs and traces of class differentiation than young people in other countries might be.

However, on a *cultural* level, adolescents in Denmark may have different frames of interpretation available for making sense of inequality than their peers in other societies. Public culture in Denmark is characterized by a powerful narrative construing the country's ethnic and cultural majority as internally homogenous (Jenkins 2011), and people who have internalized this narrative demonstrate a tendency to downplay social divisions within the majority group or to construe such divisions as benign (Faber 2010). For this reason, most Danish adults paradoxically believe that the majority of the population in Denmark is in the same undifferentiated "middle class" even as they state that class differences generally are visible and prevalent in Danish society (Harrits & Pedersen 2018; Stubager et al. 2018; Evans et al. 2022). This same tendency may be present among adolescents in Denmark as well, potentially making them less likely to acknowledge any linkage between class inequality and status hierarchy they may have experienced. This makes it all the more striking that, as I report in the next chapter, many Danish adolescents in fact *are* convinced that class position and status rank are closely coupled with one another in Danish society at large.

In paper C, I examine not one single country but rather four rather different ones: England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. These national cases vary significantly in both economic and cultural terms, having, for instance, different levels of economic inequality (OECD 2015), different labor market structures (Oesch 2006), and different political and institutional histories (Esping-Andersen 1990; Manow & van Kersbergen 2009). Yet they nonetheless demonstrate rather similar occupational class systems (Oesch 2022), and cultural stereotypes associating higher-class occupations with competence and agentic effort and lower-class occupations with incompetence have been found to proliferate in Germany (Asbrock 2010), Sweden

(Jonsson & Beach 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2017), and the United Kingdom (Dickinson 1990; Skeggs 2012). As such, the four countries serve as suitable cases for examining whether a class-status gradient is present in the occupational aspirations of young people. It must be noted, of course, that all four countries ultimately are variations of the same *type* of case: Affluent, post-industrial, and liberal-democratic societies situated in the Global North generally and the European Union specifically. This should be kept in mind as an important scope condition when interpreting the findings of the study and gauging their applicability, for the occupational aspirations of adolescents may follow very different patterns in contexts that deviate from these general case characteristics.

One final question to consider is how the findings from these different studies speak to one another. There is an evident disconnect between the research designs behind these studies, not only in that they rely on different methodologies but also in that the comparative study of paper C does not cover any data from the Danish case investigated in paper A and B. However, Denmark does not deviate significantly from the general case characteristics of the four countries covered in paper C, and it shares several case *specifics* with Sweden,[21] one of the four countries analyzed in the comparative study. The position I take, therefore, is that we can cautiously see the three studies reported in the dissertation as comparable to each other. If nothing else, the similarity between case contexts means that we can see these studies as being meaningful components of the same process of convergent triangulation (Jick 1979).

3.4.2 School Cases

The interview studies reported in paper A and paper B was devised to understand how the general population of adolescents in Denmark understand the

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[21] Beyond similarities afforded by their geographic proximity to one another and shared cultural legacy, Denmark and Sweden also have similar institutional histories (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi & Palme 1998), both having followed a “social democratic regime logic” in the development of their welfare states. For that reason, both countries have built their educational systems around a similar model of comprehensive schooling that integrates primary education and lower secondary education into the same institutions, while employing a minimum of formal tracking of students within these institutions (West & Nikolai 2013). The countries are also highly affluent while having similarly low levels of income inequality (OECD 2015). It is, in other words, not unreasonable to claim that adolescents in Denmark and Sweden navigate similar cultural and structural environments on a daily basis, though important differences might still exist in specific details about these environments.

interaction between social class and social status. As such, it was important to ensure that the study did not inadvertently recruit adolescents from only one segment of Danish society – a concern that is exacerbated by the fact that young people often are segregated along socioeconomic lines by the institutional contexts they inhabit (Domina et al. 2017).

To protect against this issue, I recruited interview participants from four separate schools that differed in the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the student body, and which were located in different parts of Denmark.[22] To arrive at some estimate of the socioeconomic composition of the schools, I elected to focus on the concentration of students hailing from *highly educated households*, based on prior studies finding that educational inequality is a central pillar of the Danish class system (Jæger & Møllegaard 2017; Heckman & Landersø 2021). Specifically, I classified households where at least one parental caretaker holds a tertiary educational degree[23] as being in a *higher class position*, and households where no caretaker holds tertiary qualifications as being in a *lower class position*, and selected schools to vary in the concentration of these two household types. In two of the four recruited schools, over 80% of students come from families where at least one parent holds a tertiary degree. In the other two recruited schools, between 45-55% of students have a parent with a tertiary degree, indicating a greater level of socioeconomic heterogeneity in the student body. It should be noted that I did not treat this classification as a way to accurately capture all facets of a household or interview participant's socioeconomic position, but only as a general proxy to ensure that I recruited participants from a diverse range of families and contexts. This strategy did ultimately prove effective in making sure that I gained contact with a more varied group of adolescents than I might have achieved by focusing on one or two schools. This was also reflected in the composition of the final sample of interview participants: 18 out of 33 participants identified as female, while 15 identified as male; 13 out of 33 participants had no parent with a tertiary degree, while 19 had at least one parent with a degree.[24]

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[22] Two of the sampled schools are located in affluent suburbs of a major Danish city, and two of them are located in socioeconomically mixed rural communities.

[23] Tertiary educational degrees, here, refers only to degrees granted by medium-cycle and long-cycle tertiary educations, corresponding to levels 6-8 in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). In the terminology employed in the Danish educational system (DISCED-15), tertiary degrees span "mellemlange videregående uddannelser", "lange videregående uddannelser", and "PhD- og forskeruddannelser".

[24] One participant preferred not to indicate the educational and occupational background of their parents, and thus cannot be classified.

To further check whether the participants represented a broad slice of Danish society, they were asked during the interviews to provide descriptions of the current or last occupation held by any parental caretakers in their household. Following the procedures advised by Connelly et al. (2016), I matched the parental occupations reported by the interview participants with occupational categories in the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08), and these categories were then matched with scores in the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI-08) (described in section 3.2 above). This exercise revealed that the participants also were diverse in terms of their *occupational class origins*, and that the rough classification of schools based on parental educational credentials accurately tracked socioeconomic distinctions in the labor market. Appendix 3 of paper A and paper B describes this occupational classification of participants in greater detail.

Chapter 4: Findings[25]

Now that we've established the conceptual and methodological foundations of the studies that make up this dissertation, we can begin to make sense of the empirical findings that these studies have produced. In this chapter, I summarize the key findings of the three research papers I have authored as part of the dissertation, and I highlight how they each contribute to answering the research question that the dissertation sets out to investigate: How do adolescents make sense of the relationship between social class and social status in society as a whole, in their peer system, and in the labor market?

In paper A, I examine the beliefs that adolescents in Denmark have formed to make sense of the status hierarchies that, in their experience, proliferate among Danish adults and in Danish society at large. Here, I find that young people in Denmark think that one must be able to display three traits to gain esteem from others: *Lifestyle affluence*, *perceived ability*, and an *agentic orientation* towards life defined by great ambition and a strong work ethic. I also show that Danish adolescents believe that these three traits are more strongly present in the higher reaches of the class ladder than in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, convincing them that their society is characterized by a distinct class gradient in status. In paper B, I investigate whether class and status are similarly related in the hierarchies that proliferate in adolescents' peer systems. Here, I find that they tend to hold more ambiguous status beliefs: While young people in Denmark think that one's class background *can* matter for one's status in the eyes of peers, they ultimately believe that socioeconomic disadvantages can be overcome by displaying sufficient confidence and autonomy within peer relations. Finally, in paper C, I show that young people who think of themselves as agentic and capable people are more likely to aspire for occupations located in the higher end of the occupational spectrum than in the middle or the lower end. I argue that this suggests that many young people in Europe have learned to think of the occupational stratification inherent in contemporary labor markets as a ladder of competence, agency, and esteem – a ladder where the most capable and driven people sit at the top, while the inept and the impassive settle on the lower rungs.

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[25] Note that most of the text presented in this chapter is a condensed version of the text found in the three papers that the chapter provides a summary of. Further analytical details can be found in in the papers.

These findings are presented in further detail below, outlining the most important empirical patterns uncovered in each paper and my arguments for how we should make sense of these patterns. All told, the dissertation indicates that many adolescents maturing into affluent, post-industrial societies learn to think of social class and social status as being closely intertwined in society and in the labor market. They are led to believe in this link between class and status because they are taught, through a myriad of different socializing influences and cultural narratives, that esteem primarily is allocated to those who display affluence, ability, and agency, while simultaneously coming to think that people in higher class positions – and particularly people in higher-class occupations – excel in all three traits.

4.1 Adolescents' Beliefs about the Relationship between Social Class and Social Status in Society

To query the status beliefs held by a person, one should not ask them what they, personally, hold in high or low esteem, but rather what they believe that *most people* respect – the evaluative consensus that they have come to assume exists within the communities and societies they inhabit. This consensus is rarely, if ever, written down and spelled out in a rulebook that we are told to study and follow, and yet it permeates our culture and seeps into every moment of our lives. We see it performed in innumerable everyday status interactions, in the rapid-firing allocations of esteem and attention that play out on the street and in the workplace, on the TV and the flashing screens of our phones. And when we ask Danish adolescents what sort of consensus they believe characterizes their society – what type of person most people in Denmark respect or look down on – many of them state that they have noticed that one thing, in particular, tends to be valued by nearly everyone: Money.

When asked to describe the kind of person they believe is generally respected and admired in Denmark, more than half the participants in my interview study spontaneously mentioned *wealth* and *expensive lifestyle practices* as common markers of status. These descriptions were provided even before I explicitly brought class inequality into the interviews, and when I did ask directly whether the participants felt that higher class positions provide high status, all but five participants agreed. For many of them, this seemed to be so commonly acknowledged that it almost seemed strange that I was asking them about it, rather like asking someone if going for a swim makes you wet. When I asked Ida, the daughter of a child care worker and a shop manager, what most people in Denmark intuitively respect, she replied without hesitation:

> Ida[26]: If it's, like, among grownups, you maybe need to have a job [to be respected], and maybe also a partner and a family, and you should be making good money. [...] I think ... For example, maybe, if you're a garbage man I think maybe you'd be looked down on a bit. Compared to if you're a lawyer, then that's pretty cool. Maybe you make a lot of money there.

In congruence with the "lifestyle perspective" reviewed in chapter 2, the adolescents interviewed in this dissertation described a fairly clear hierarchy of lifestyle practices and occupational positions in Danish society, in which practices that seemed expensive and exclusive had greater prestige than those that were commonly available, and in which jobs confer status equal to the money they earn. This hierarchy of affluence and exclusivity was one they often seemed to see in society at large: Ida, for example, told how she couldn't help but notice that people dressed in expensive and stylish clothes just seemed to garner more attention when they walked down the street, and Anne, one of Ida's close friends, described how the most popular people on social media sites often made a big show of displaying their affluent and luxurious lifestyles. Yet this preoccupation with affluence was also something that the interview participants encountered closer to home. Emma, the daughter of an insurance agent and a designer, mentioned that she'd noticed that adults always introduced themselves by the type of job they worked in: "Adults are always talking about things like that, so I guess they care about it. Maybe it's just curiosity, I don't know. But some people earn, like, a lot of money, and then they keep talking about it." Similarly, Mads, the son of two medical professionals, mentioned that his parents had told him that the best restaurants and hotels were the most *expensive* ones. William, the son of an IT professional and a faculty member at a university, summarized this belief quite succinctly:

> Interviewer: Do you think that getting to the top [gestures at figure 1], like the very top, is that a dream for most people in Denmark? Or do people not think like that?
>
> William: I think everyone, even if they deny it, if they look deep inside, then of course they want to be rich. You know, have money to spend on parties and cars, everything you could want, cool clothes, cool phone, cool house. Even if they deny it and even if they say, "Life is good as long as you're happy."

This, then, is the first status belief that seemed to proliferate among the interviewed adolescents: That esteem and attention is allocated to those who can display high levels of affluence with their everyday lifestyle practices. It is not

[26] Note that pseudonyms are used in place of the interview participants' real names, to protect their identities.

hard to grasp how such a belief implies a socioeconomic gradient in the distribution of status, for it is difficult to maintain a terribly affluent lifestyle without access to sufficient economic resources. As phrased by William above, it's easier to have cool things if you're rich. Yet the interviewed adolescents also expressed status beliefs that constructed a more subtle linkage between class position and status rank. This was the case for another belief that was highly prevalent among the interview participants: That esteem is allocated to those who demonstrate high levels of *expertise* and *intelligence*. As these participants told it, those who gain worth and prominence in Danish society are those who develop their skills and capabilities, who work and study to become smarter and more resourceful than most. As Rebecca, the daughter of a teacher and engineer, put it: "I think most people respect those who know what they're doing." In congruence with the predictions of status construction theory, many young people in Denmark associate status with *competence* above all else. However, when I asked the participants expressing this belief to elaborate and explain what they meant, it became evident that they had learned to associate status with a specific *kind* of competence. This was demonstrated, for instance, by my conversation with Lærke, the daughter of two medical professionals:

> Interviewer: So, I want to ask you about what it takes to be, you know, a part of society. So if you were to think about it, how would a person have to be, to be someone who people would look up to and respect here in Denmark?
>
> Lærke: I think that you need, like ... A position where people listen to you. And that doesn't mean that you have to be the CEO of a giant company or something like that, but I think, for example, with the war in Ukraine, we turn to the experts, who know a lot about this stuff. I think things like that matter.
>
> Interviewer: So, expertise, or something like that?
>
> Lærke: Yeah, we turn to those who have long educations.[27] Like, the first person we ask probably isn't a construction worker who's working on ... I think that generally, that long educations, their status is pretty high.

Statements such as these, which draw a nexus between academic training, high levels of skill and competence, and the acquisition of esteem and attention, were common throughout the interviews – and especially among adolescents whose own parents hold advanced educational degrees. Sara, whose parents also hold high positions in the medical sector, told that most people in Denmark respect "people with highly educated jobs. You want to be like them.

[27] "Long education" is a commonly used phrase in Danish that denotes college-level tertiary education.

Because they're smart, they have lots of money. Like, it's just ... They have a good life, I think a lot of people would think." Along the same lines, Jeppe, the son of a medical specialist and a legal professional, believed strongly that education is tied to esteem, as it gives people the impression that you "know what you're talking about." Many of the interview participants had, in other words, learned to associate competence with status, but they had simultaneously learned to associate competence with being highly educated and holding occupations associated with advanced educational credentials.

This belief was also frequently expressed in the inverse direction: That those with short or no education commonly are thought of as *incompetent* and, consequently, as being unworthy of esteem. When asked to describe the type of person who they believe most people look down on in Denmark, multiple interview participants intuitively thought of workers performing routine manual or service functions. Among the occupational positions that were described as being held in low esteem were truck drivers, farmers, secretaries, cleaning personnel, and shop clerks. Three separate interviewees from three separate schools, including Ida in the quote presented above, all mentioned garbage disposal workers as the go-to example of the type of person who is widely looked down upon in society at large.

All told, many adolescents in Denmark have formed a status belief in which esteem is awarded to people who display high levels of competence, and they have simultaneously learned that competence is more commonly possessed by those in higher class positions than those in the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. However, the interview participants not only described class distinctions in intelligence, but also in *ambition* and *agency*, construing competence as being not just one's capability to act but one's basic *willingness* to act and advance one's position in society. This was expressed quite strongly by Nicklas, the son of an engineer and a teacher:

> Interviewer: So, would you say there are class differences like this here in Denmark? [gestures at figure 1]
>
> Nicklas: Yeah, you can, I think you can tell the difference. Like, you do sometimes think, like, I see a person and think, "I don't want to end up like that." And then I just try to do my best to not end up like that. You can feel on people if they just haven't got any go, they don't have any power. They're like, they're just there. I feel that you can sense that. And then there's those who want to be something, and who kinda have a dream about being able to do something, and I feel like people who dream about becoming something, they are the ones who actually do become something. Just, like, they have the energy to become something.

> Interviewer: So is this something that, would you say, can you recognize people who are from different parts of society? Like, can you feel if someone is from the higher end, the middle, or the bottom, or what do you think?
>
> Nicklas: Yeah, like, mostly it's people in the lower end. You can definitely feel when people are just, they're just tired of, like, they just want to get things over with. And then the people in the higher end, I think that's something like, they're passionate about an idea of some kind, and then, you know, you hope things work out for them. So yeah, I think you can tell the difference, actually. And people in the middle, they're just happy, you know.

As shown here, Nicklas expresses great admiration and enthusiasm for people who embody a kind of *agentic orientation* towards their life, who have distinct passion projects that they work tirelessly to pursue, and pity for those who seem bereft of such personal agency. To be low in the class system, in his view, is not just to be poor, but to be a person without hope and initiative, to be deprived of the energy and purpose that he has come to believe characterizes people worthy of esteem. He was not alone in this view: When I asked the interview participants to describe the type of person they believed are widely held in low esteem in Denmark, many referred to "people on public benefits" as a kind of stock character and described them as being seen as lazy, lethargic, and either unwilling or incapable of doing anything to improve their situation in life.

In summary, paper A outlines the status beliefs that young people in Denmark tend to hold, and it examines whether we see the contours of a socioeconomic gradient in esteem in these beliefs. Through an inductive interview study conducted with adolescent participants from four different schools, I find that young people in Denmark learn that gaining esteem and worth in Danish society is conditional on displaying three valued traits: Lifestyle affluence, perceived ability, and personal agency. Yet even as they learn that the society they live in valorizes these traits and expects them to do the same, they also learn that those in higher class positions – and in particular those with advanced educational degrees and jobs located at the top of the occupational system – are seen to possess them to a far higher degree than those situated on the lower rungs of the class ladder. Taken together, this indicates that young people growing up in Denmark are likely to believe that one's class position is strongly linked to one's rank in society's dominant status hierarchy.

4.2 Adolescents' Beliefs about the Relationship between Social Class and Social Status in their Peer System

In paper B, I investigate whether social class and social status are linked in the deeply impactful status interactions that adolescents have within their *peer system* – their set of direct or indirect relations with non-familial age-mates (Rubin & Bukowski 2015). Extant research has shown that young people tend to be well aware of class distinctions among their peers, but few studies have examined how they understand the interaction between such distinctions and the hierarchies of status and popularity that tend to proliferate in adolescent peer communities.

Once again drawing on the detailed interviews I conducted with adolescents in Denmark, I investigate how the interview participants make sense of the interaction between class inequality and status hierarchy in their peer relations first by examining whether they are at all perceptive to class differentiation at the peer level. In line with prior studies, the majority of the adolescents I spoke with stated that class distinctions were fairly evident in their peer system: They readily described socioeconomic distinctions in how young people dress, what they do in their free time, and how their families live. Sara, who attended a school where most students hail from affluent households in the upper middle class but where a few students are bussed in from underprivileged housing blocks, told that she couldn't help but notice how the families of her peers differed when she visited them at home – that some lived in large, spacious houses while others lived in apartments, and that some always had nice, fresh food in their kitchens, while others had "bad food". Along the same lines, Christian and Oscar, two boys who both hailed from working-class families, described how they felt ignored by the girls in their classroom, who were much more interested in "pretty boys" from a nearby city who were always dressed in expensive and stylish clothes and who were "just a different kind of group" from most people Christian and Oscar knew. In these interviews, when I asked the participants whether a young person born into the higher end, the middle, or the lower end of the distributions shown in figure 1 would be mostly different from- or mostly similar to each other, over half of all interviewees stated that visible distinctions would be apparent.

The participants were far less sure, however, about whether these distinctions mattered for the *status* that young people tend to hold among their peers. While about a third of the interview participants stated that socioeconomic disadvantages clearly translated into disadvantages in status relations, the majority of the interviewed adolescents held more ambiguous and uncertain beliefs as to the interaction between social class and social status in their peer system. The impression that these uncertain participants gave was that

they believed that one's socioeconomic position, in the form of material wealth and access to exclusive lifestyle practices, *could* matter for one's social standing among other young people, but that the influence of such factors often was trumped by other things in practice. This view was held strongly, for instance, by Mille, the daughter of a freelance web designer and a shop owner:

> Interviewer: So, do you think that the layer of society that someone is from, does that matter for how they're treated by other young people? Like, does it matter for becoming "cool", do you think?
>
> Mille: Like, sorta yes and no. Because, I want to say, if someone lives in the **coolest** house and have some really chill parents, and everything is just great and they have all the cool things, and if they hold a party and a lot of people show up, then I think people would be, like, "He's super cool". I think so. But I also don't think that it's something that people, like, look for every day. Like, I don't think anyone goes around looking at others thinking "She's got no money" … Because I know there's some on our grade level who don't have a lot of money but who don't look like it, and they're also pretty popular. I don't think people walk around thinking, "You've got a lot of money, you're popular – you've got no money, you're not popular".

Over the course of my conversation with Mille, she described the status position that adolescents tend to hold in their peer community as a complex tug-of-war between their demographic and socioeconomic background on the one hand, and their *personality* on the other, with one personal trait seeming to matter more than any other factor: One's ability to demonstrate high levels of *personal agency* by acting with confidence and self-assurance in peer relations and by engaging in risk behaviors in defiance of the rules imposed by adult authorities. You become one of the popular peers, Mille told, if "you're really extroverted, you're out all the time, and you're just, like, 'fuck the rules'." She was far from alone in this view: When I asked the interview participants to explain how a person needs to be to gain respect and status within their peer system, the great majority of them fixated on behaviors that can be said to reflect an *agentic modality of being*, understood as behaviors that advance individual preferences and distinctiveness by displaying confidence, assertiveness, and autonomy from external control (Abele & Wojcizke 2014; Locke 2015). As told by the interviewed adolescents, such independent and agentic behaviors came in many forms. Lærke, the daughter of two medical specialists, argued that the common denominator among the popular peers in her classroom was that they were often among the *first* to do things: The first to start partying, the first to try alcohol, the first to have sex. They were also highly agentic in the day-to-day interactions of the peer community, often be-

ing the first to start activities during recess in school or to come up with something to do when hanging out after school. These were peers who, as Christian and Oscar put it, could "carry at parties[28] – you know, they can just walk into a party and talk with *anyone* and make sure the party goes well". Nicklas, who attended the same school as Mille, gave a particularly powerful endorsement of those who could display confidence and self-assurance:

> Interviewer: So, how do you have to be to be someone who others notice and respect?
>
> Nicklas: Like, I think you need a big network. If you're social, if you've got good social skills and just know how to talk with people, and again, you're just good at being yourself, even when you're talking to people who aren't like you and you don't even know who they are, but you're still yourself and you're just confident and open. Then I think **anyone** would respect you. So you build a big network that way, and I think that'll make you respected by pretty much everyone.
>
> Interviewer: So, like, social skills, being good at talking with all sorts of people?
>
> Nicklas: Yeah, exactly. And you maybe don't even need that if you're just, you're just yourself, and your whole network knows who you are, even if you're, like, an awkward person. Because if they know you're an awkward person, but you're not embarrassed about it, you're still just yourself ... Like, I'm 100 that people would respect that.

In my conversation with Nicklas, he spent a great deal of time valorizing this ideal of "being able to be yourself", expressing great admiration for those who are socially prominent and proactive while also being confident enough not to modulate their personality to fit in with others. This ideal was, in fact, echoed by many other interview participants, who often emphasized how they respected people "who are *real*, who don't try to be like everybody else", as phrased by Emilie, the daughter of a social worker and a secretary. This recurring fixation on developing into a confident and self-assured person indicates that Danish adolescents not only socialize one another into thinking that one must be agentic and confident to gain esteem among others, but also into

[28] Though the interview with Christian and Oscar was conducted in Danish, they used the English word "carry" here, a term they may have borrowed from competitive online gaming (seeing as both of them are avid gamers). To "carry" in online gaming is to be a high-value player who is doing more work than other team members to secure a win. A carry is someone who can "put the team on their back" and carry them to victory by great individual effort and skill. In professional competitive gaming, teams often have a designated carry who plays a similar role to a forward in football or a quarterback in American football.

adopting this pursuit of agency into their self-concepts, making it not only a salient status belief but also a deeply held personal aspiration.

It must be noted, however, that young people do not value personal agency as an abstract and perfect ideal, but rather their own local negotiated definitions of what it means to behave in an agentic fashion – and these local definitions are often dominated by the preferences of peers who already hold positions of prominence and power in the peer system. In all four schools I visited, risk behaviors such as going to parties, experimenting with alcohol and drugs, and engaging in romantic and sexual relations, were widely held as archetypal examples of how an impressive person is supposed to act, yet at the same time it was only a minority of students at each school who actually practiced these behaviors to any significant degree. The majority of the adolescents I spoke with rarely attended the wild parties frequented by their popular peers – yet most of them hoped that they one day would be able to act like this confident and prominent elite. This was especially pronounced among participants who described themselves as shy and insecure people, including Mille, Christian and Oscar, and Lærke. While these insecure participants often expressed frustration with how fixated their peers were on emulating the behavior of their popular classmates, they all at some point in their interviews told that they, too, wished that they were "cool enough", in the words of Mille, to attend the big parties, to begin dating, and to get drunk. Thus, while adolescents may publicly valuate the ideal of "being yourself", they also come to learn that some selves are better than others. This also became painfully apparent to the interview participants when they attempted to make sense of why some of their peers ended up as low-status outsiders who were relegated to the fringes of the peer system. The interviewed adolescents consistently described such outsiders with very similar terms: They were quiet, passive, anxious, and they tended to isolate themselves from the social life of the peer community at large. Even though these outsiders often held distinctive hobbies and interests, they were not valued for "being themselves", but were rather construed as *passive* and *insecure*, and the interview participants seemed to learn a clear lesson from them: That to be seen as having little agency is to be held in low esteem.

All told, this interview study indicates that young people in Denmark tend to place the pursuit of agency and autonomy at the very center of their personal identity development, and that this shared preoccupation with developing into agentic and independent people becomes a powerful organizing principle for the status relations that play out among them. While other factors doubtlessly shaped the status hierarchies within their peer systems, they seemed to be so mesmerized by this quest for agency that it dominated their subjective sense-making and tended to overpower their awareness of other

things that might influence one's social standing among peers. In other words, agentic displays – acting with confidence and initiative in social relations, demonstrating the ability to disregard external authority and constraint – were so immediately salient to the interview participants that they rendered more distal influences on one's status position obscure and ambiguous. And it was this powerful, proximate salience of agency as a status determinant that rendered the majority of the interview participants unsure about what role class inequalities play within their peer systems. Mille, for example, commented that the popular and outspoken girls in her classroom did seem to live in unusually spacious houses and always seemed to have nice, modern clothes, but when asked to explain why these girls held high status, she focused only on their personal charisma, their unwavering self-confidence, and their frequent participation in prestigious parties. Sara, who believed that class disparities generally proliferate in Denmark and who had provided vivid descriptions of material inequalities in her peer system, was convinced that personality ultimately mattered more than one's background in determining one's status position:

> Interviewer: So, do you think … The segment of society you're from, does that matter for your status among young people? Like, is a young person's popularity affected by which block they're from? (gestures at figure 1)
>
> Sara: Well … Like, in our classroom, there's people from around here, and most people here they have lots of money … But there's also people from, you know, other places, who don't have the same as most people here. And I feel like, in the classroom, we've gotten pretty good at not caring about that, we don't see any differences between people at all in that way. Like, there's people in the top of the hierarchy, who have, you know, lots of popularity, who are from "down here" (points at the lower end of figure 1)
>
> Interviewer: Ah, okay. It's not something that matters a lot, or …?
>
> Sara: Not really, not anymore. Like, now we even kinda make fun of people who have lots of money. Just for fun, it's just teasing between friends. But it's not something that-
>
> Interviewer: It's not something that people tend to think about?
>
> Sara: No, not really. But it wasn't like that when we were younger. Back then it was all about who had the newest phone and things like that. We were really competing on that in the classroom – like, who had the most expensive clothes. Now it's more, you know … About how you behave. People don't care what you wear in that way.

Across three of the four schools covered in the study, participants made very similar statements, describing instances where they had noticed that a peer

had risen in status rank even though they hailed from a disadvantaged social background. As these interview participants told it, those who could display great interpersonal confidence and an agentic attitude towards adult authority tended to rise in social standing and gain a place of prominence in their peer system regardless of their origins in life. Thomas, one of Mille's classmates, distilled this belief to its bare essentials when I asked him whether social class matters for status among adolescents: "I don't think so. Status is just 100% personality and attitude."

Paper B, then, provides a complex look into how young people learn to understand the interaction between social class and social status through the formative status interactions in their peer system. On the one hand, the great salience of personal agency within these status interactions leads many adolescents to *decouple* class and status from one another, as they instead come to believe that esteem is allocated to those with agentic and confident personalities regardless of their social background. These findings seem rather encouraging at first glance, as they suggest that adolescents do not learn to reproduce class differentials in social status through their peer relations – yet a more troubling reality hides underneath this initial impression. First of all, the adolescents I spoke with demonstrated little awareness of the fact that not all people have equal chances of cultivating the agentic traits and displays that are so highly valued by their age-mates. While young people do have individual control over the degree to which they set agency as one of their primary social *goals*, their ability to translate these goals into agentic *behavior* within the peer system may be greatly constrained by a number of factors: First by their family history, as agentic personality traits such as extroversion and openness are both genetically and environmentally conditioned (Briley & Tucker-Drob 2014); and secondly by their family's position in the social and socioeconomic rank-orders of society, for adolescents from affluent households and privileged identity groups tend to demonstrate higher levels of personal agency than those from marginal social positions (Bandura et al. 2001; Usher & Pajares 2008).

A second concern is that while adolescents are socializing one another in their peer systems, they are simultaneously being encultured into adopting stereotypes that proliferate in the public culture of their society. One highly salient stereotypes in contemporary societies are *class stereotypes*, which ascribe greater levels of competence and agentic potential to positions higher in the class ladder than positions in the middle and the bottom (Cuddy et al. 2008; Durante et al. 2017; Fiske & Durante 2019; Ridgeway & Markus 2022). As we saw in paper A, this is a view that proliferates among Danish adolescents as well. Thus, the status belief that young people acquire from their formative peer interactions – that esteem is allocated to those with great personal agency

– may not be overtly prejudiced against specific social identities or class groups, but it may eventually lead them to reproduce a class gradient in social status when it interacts with salient class stereotypes. To examine the degree to which adolescents growing up in affluent, post-industrial societies adopt such stereotypes, we now turn to the findings of paper C.

4.3 Adolescents' Vocational Development under the Influence of Class Stereotypes

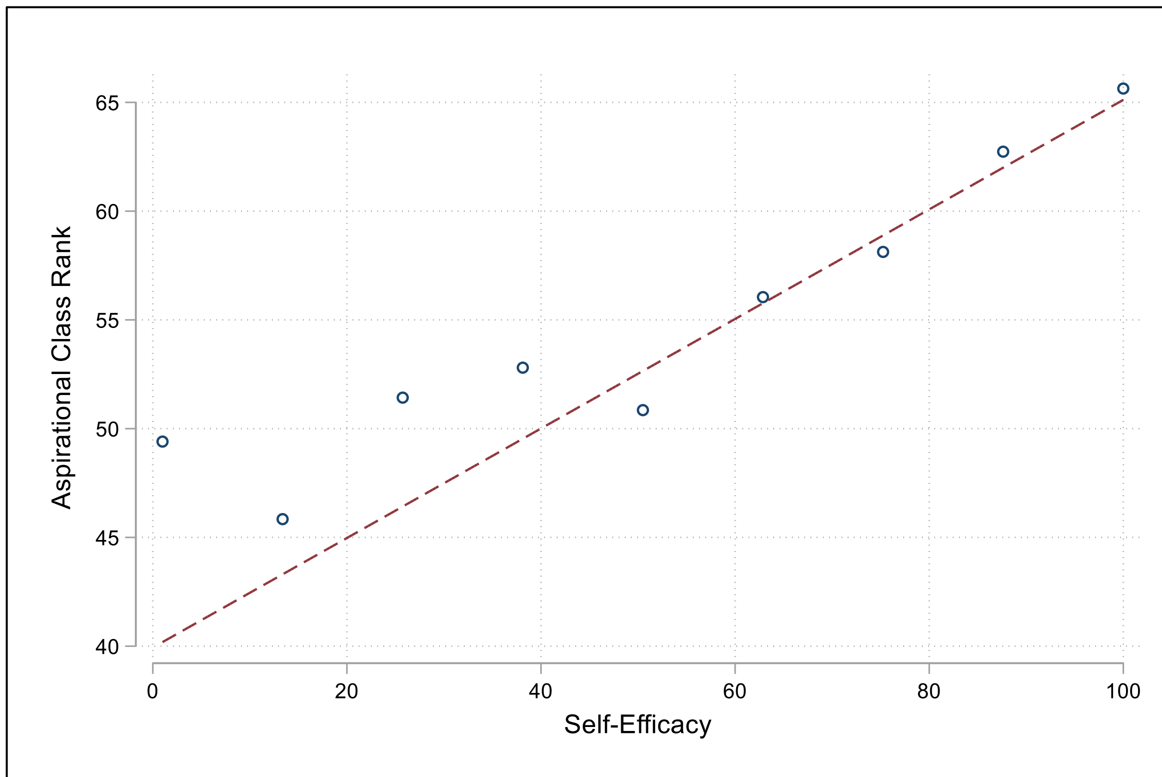
Occupations, as we saw in paper A, are highly salient symbols of class to young people. When they refer to positions of socioeconomic prominence, they refer not only to "the wealthy" but also to "doctors", "lawyers", and "CEOs", and when they try to make sense of the lower range of the class ladder, they are just as likely to think of "cleaning ladies", "garbage men", and "truck drivers" as they are to think of "the poor". This is no coincidence, for young people are presented with more and more information about the occupational system as they enter adolescence, provided by well-meaning parents, teachers, and counselors, and by diffuse influences from their general cultural environment. Such information is seldom neutral, but instead tends to construe some occupations as more demanding, more exclusive, and more *impressive* than others – evoking deep-seated cultural stereotypes that associate higher-class occupations with intelligence and initiative and lower-class occupations with dumb labor and low cognitive ability (Jonsson & Beach 2015; Durante et al. 2017; Volpato et al. 2017).

In paper C, I investigate the degree to which adolescents across Europe have adopted such class-stereotypical representations of the occupational system, by examining whether there is a relationship between the *class rank* of their ideal occupation and their *self-efficacy*, defined as the degree to which they have internalized a view of themselves as capable and driven people (Bandura et al. 2001; Bandura 2006). I draw, here, on the theoretical framework advanced by Linda Gottfredson (1981), which claims that adolescents navigate their vocational development by matching themselves with occupational stereotypes that seem congruent with their developing self-concepts. Following this logic, if young people in Europe have internalized and adopted class-stereotypical views of the occupational system, then we should see a strong association between their self-efficacy and their aspirational class rank, as adolescents who have come to see themselves as driven and agentic people should steer for the higher ranks of the class ladder and ignore careers that might land them in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

This is exactly the pattern we observe when we examine the correlation between European adolescents' self-efficacy and their aspirational class rank, as illustrated by figure 2. Self-efficacy is operationalized here as an index comprised of two items that measure the degree to which respondents feel that they have control over their lives and their future.[29] As shown below, we see a positive relationship between respondents' self-efficacy and the class rank of their aspirations, following an approximately linear trend. When asked what occupation they would like to work in as adults, respondents with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to mention occupations with a higher position in the class system, and vice versa for respondents with lower levels of self-efficacy. To illustrate, among respondents with a maximum score on the utilized index of self-efficacy, the average occupational aspiration falls in the mid-60s of the ISEI scale, spanning occupational groups such as finance professionals, life science professionals, and journalists. Among respondents at the midpoint of the self-efficacy index, the average occupational aspiration falls in the lower 50s of the ISEI scale, covering occupations such as administrative secretaries, sales agents, and nursing and midwifery professionals. It should be noted that this trend does level off below the midpoint of the self-efficacy index, indicating that there is little difference between the aspirational class rank of respondents with very low levels and moderate levels of self-efficacy. However, young people who believe very strongly in themselves, who think of themselves as people with great agency and potential, tend to steer vigorously for the high rungs of the class ladder.

[29] The specific items used, are: *a) I can influence my future*; and *b) I can put my plans into action*. Further details on the construction of this index are available in paper C. The index is scaled to have a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 100. The distribution of observations on this index is strongly left-skewed, as most respondents have a high level of self-efficacy. The mean of the index is 77.71 with a standard deviation of 18.04.

Figure 2: Average Class Rank of Occupational Aspirations Conditional on Level of Self-Efficacy



Note: The figure displays a binned scatterplot grouping respondents into nine equal-sized segments with different means on an index measuring their self-efficacy and displays the average aspirational class rank (ISEI score of occupational aspirations) for each segment.
n = 10,704

This initial analysis seems to indicate that adolescents who think of themselves as agentic and capable people are more likely to match themselves with occupations at the top of the class system, while adolescents who do not think of themselves as possessed of great personal agency instead match themselves with occupations in the middle of the class system. We need to consider, however, that this relationship could be spurious in nature, as it could be driven by a greater number of confounding factors, such as the adolescents' objective intellectual abilities, their demographic background, and their socioeconomic origins. Further, we also need to adjust for the fact that the respondents in the utilized dataset were sampled within the same classrooms and the same school institutions, and they may thus have influenced each other's responses.[30] To

[30] The dataset being used for this analysis, *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU)*, was collected using a stratified sampling strategy, in which the responding adolescents are clustered first within schools and secondly within classrooms. To adjust for this issue, the multivariate analysis is run first as a baseline OLS model and secondly as a fixed-effects model

account for these issues, table 1 presents the results of a multivariate regression analysis examining the relationship between the respondents' self-efficacy and their aspirational class rank while accounting for a number of control variables (shown in the note beneath the table). Model I displays the results from a baseline regression model, and model II displays results from a fixed-effects model holding constant variation at the school and classroom level.

Table 1: Association between Self-Efficacy and Aspirational Class Rank (OLS)

	Model I: Baseline				**Model II: Fixed Effects (School, Classroom)**			
	β	**se**		**n**	**β**	**se**		**n**
Main Effect of Self-Efficacy on Aspirational Class rank	0.168	0.022	***	8,830	0.138	0.025	***	8,818

As shown, there is a positive and statistically significant association between respondents' self-efficacy and the class rank of their occupational aspirations in both models. This indicates that no matter their demographic background, class origins, and objective academic abilities, adolescents generally match themselves with occupations higher in the class system the higher their perceived self-efficacy is. Thus, it would seem that adolescents across Europe behave as we would expect them to if they have internalized class stereotypes that construe the class ladder as a ladder of competence and agency. Even when employing an extensive control strategy accounting for a diverse set of potential confounders, we find that adolescents who think of themselves as highly capable individuals tend to aspire for occupations placed in the top of the class system, while adolescents who doubt their own competence instead match themselves with careers in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

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holding constant all variation at the school and classroom levels. Both models are run with cluster-robust standard errors to adjust for any inflation of standard errors that may have been caused by the stratified sampling strategy. Finally, it should be noted that CILS4EU was constructed to be representative for the general populations of adolescents in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, but that the dataset simultaneously oversamples youths with a migration background to investigate their social and structural background. To adjust for this, the analyses in table 1 above are run with design weights that correct for differential sampling probabilities and non-response rates between adolescents with a host-country background and adolescents with a migrant background. For a full description of the variables and specifications employed in this analysis, see paper C.

***

All told, even though the three papers summarized above investigate different empirical cases and employ different analytical approaches, they arrive at congruent findings: Paper C, outlined above, suggests that European adolescents tend to see the occupational system as a *class system*, and to think of occupational class positions at the top of the socioeconomic ladder as synonymous with competence, skill, and an agentic drive to work hard and strive for advancement. As shown by paper A, these are the traits that, at least in Denmark, one must display to gain esteem and value in the eyes of others. Paper B demonstrates that displays of personal agency and autonomy similarly are key to gaining esteem in adolescents' peer relations, but they are less convinced that one's class position matters for mustering such displays at the peer level.

Taken together, these findings show that many young people learn to think of social class and social status as being closely intertwined in the societies they live in. The papers also show that adolescents are particularly likely to use *occupations* as symbols of class positions, and that they see jobs located at the top of the occupational system as visible badges of competence and agentic effort while seeing jobs at the vocational or routine level as indications of incompetence or a lack of energy and initiative. This convinces them that a class-status linkage also exists within the labor market. They are far less certain, however, about whether class inequalities play a role in determining status hierarchies within their peer system. Adolescents instead learn from these formative peer interactions that esteem should be allocated to those who can cultivate and exercise personal agency, and that esteem may fairly be *withheld* from those who seemingly fail to cultivate such traits. This belief is not in itself prejudiced against any one identity group, yet as I show in paper A, adolescents are simultaneously exposed to stereotypical representations that construe people in higher class positions as having exceptional levels of agency and people in low class positions as lacking agency – and in interaction, these two processes of socialization lead adolescents to think of social class and social status as closely entwined in society at large.

Chapter 5: Reflections on Contextualization

We are sent here by history.
- Shabaka Hutchings

The findings outlined in the previous chapter indicate that European adolescents believe that the countries they live in are characterized by a strong link between social class and social status. When they look out at the societies they are meant to one day inherit, young people cannot help but notice that people in higher socioeconomic positions are more prominent, more respected, and more influential than those who hold positions in the middle and the lower end of the class system. Yet the impression they form of this class-based hierarchy is not one of coercive elitism, in which the higher classes have captured the highest status ranks and forced the rest of the population to accept it at gunpoint. Instead, many young people believe that people in higher socioeconomic positions hold elevated status because they have *earned it*, because they have *done better* than people below them: They lead more interesting and dynamic lives than the population at large, they are more skillful and more intelligent, they work tirelessly to pursue their passions and manage to overcome external constraints by great efforts of willpower and agentic motivation. What adolescents learn, in short, is that those in higher class positions tend to excel in the personal qualities that are culturally valued above all else. They seem to be living exemplars of *affluence*, *ability*, and *agency* – the trifecta of traits that we have come to valorize in many Western societies – and this grants them greater esteem than those who are relegated to the lower rungs of the class ladder.

Before we begin to consider what implications these findings might have, one issue lingers and remains to be addressed: How did we get here? How did affluence, ability, and agency become the basis on which we allocate esteem? This is no small question to answer, and providing an exhaustive explanation of how and why contemporary European status hierarchies have emerged lies beyond the scope of what this dissertation seeks to accomplish. And yet, there is still a need to place the findings of the preceding analysis in *context*, for while the dissertation shows that the class-status linkage persists in affluent, liberal democratic societies, it also must be said that it takes a different form than it did in the past. In this chapter, I attempt to provide a brief account of a long historical process that is partly responsible, I believe, for why class inequality and status hierarchy are inextricably linked in modern Europe.

5.1 A Brief History of Hierarchy in Europe: From the Age of Aristocracy to the Tyranny of Merit

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, the linkage between social class and social status is by no means a new phenomenon. When we look back on the annals of documented human history, we find that class inequality and status hierarchy have been closely related in many complex societies, as the wealthiest members of these societies often have held monopolies over positions of social and symbolic prominence while their less affluent countrymen have been relegated to positions of subservience and subordination (Flannery & Marcus 2012; Piketty 2022). In the grand span of history, the class-status linkage has most commonly been constructed through institutions of *hereditary aristocratic privilege*, a social order in which elites leverage their economic and symbolic power to establish rigid caste systems that portray those in high socioeconomic positions as being inherently superior to the rest of the population, and thus more worthy of esteem and distinction (Flannery & Marcus 2012: 187ff; Weber 2010; Haynes & Hickel 2018). Aristocratic elites have historically sought to construct such caste systems by construing themselves as scions of noble and distinguished bloodlines that descend from purer and more virtuous strains of humanity than the common populace (Dumont 1981; Crouch 2015). In such a value system, class inequality and status hierarchy become linked because socioeconomic layers are thought to be *fundamentally distinct castes* that are ranked in terms of alleged differences in *inherent worth*, in the traits that are held as valuable in dominant public culture (Haynes & Hickel 2018: 4).

This is not the kind of status hierarchy that we have seen traces of in this dissertation. The adolescents who participated in my interviews did believe that people in higher class positions are commonly held in greater esteem than those lower on the class ladder, but when asked to explain and elaborate why they held this belief, they did not say that higher class people were born better than others. They believed, instead, that people in elevated class positions had *achieved* their distinction: They had gone through long and grueling courses of education to improve their skills and their expertise, they had persevered in the face of constraint and harnessed their passion and willpower to achieve their dreams. As one participant, Silas, explained: "[most people] respect those who've put in a huge effort and who've worked really hard to get what they have". Such a claim would make little sense in the moral universe of an aristocratic society, in which the worth of person is determined not by their own actions but by their caste lineage. Adolescents maturing into contemporary European societies may be just as prone to constructing a linkage between class and status as people were in the past, but they do so on radically different

grounds – and to understand how this change has come about, we need to take a look at a cultural shift that centuries ago changed how we make sense of stratification as a phenomenon.

Caste systems were a highly durable social order in premodern European history, persisting from antiquity and well into early modernity. They achieved this durability, partly, due to the ideological hegemony of the aristocratic value systems that supported them. As detailed by the historian David Crouch in his book *The Birth of Nobility* (2015), aristocratic elites were greatly concerned with maintaining an image of a "noble lineage" by portraying themselves as exalted descendants of ancient kings, heroes, and saints, and they spent vast fortunes on demonstrating their ostensibly superior lineages to the population at large, erecting monuments in honor of mythological ancestors and sponsoring churches and monasteries so that the clergy would affirm their claims of noble heritage to the common folk. This vast ideological apparatus served to entrench aristocratic stratification as a societal model into the cultural fabric of early European societies, so that even when subordinated groups at the bottom of the feudal pyramid rebelled and overthrew the elites who marginalized them, new hereditary elites would typically coalesce and reestablish the same rigid caste system they had replaced (Scheidel 2018: 86ff). A critical juncture in the history of stratification was reached, however, when popular challenges against aristocratic inequality became aligned with ideological trends developing among Europe's intelligentsia. Specifically, the cultural dominance of the aristocratic order was shaken by the emerging doctrine of *liberal humanism*, a philosophical movement which held that a virtuous society must honor the autonomy and potential of all citizens and not just those born arbitrarily into powerful families.

One early proponent of this view was the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola, who argued in his influential work *Oration on the Dignity of Man* that what was truly valuable about humanity was its boundless potential for *improvement* and *self-mastery*. Contrary to the prevailing cultural sentiment of his time, Mirandola argued that humans were not born with a fixed nature, but rather that all people could develop their faculties and abilities, and he held that those who were most worthy of honor and esteem were those who seized on this potential to cultivate great personal abilities and virtues (Mirandola 2012: 6-8). Mirandola saw his work as a theological treatise rather than a political one and he made no explicit attempt to challenge the aristocratic orders that dominated European polities in the Renaissance, but his claims were in direct conflict with the central tenets of the ideology that these aristocratic orders relied on. After all, if all humans have the same inherent potential to develop and improve themselves, then it seems incongruous to insist that some people simply are born better than others, that humans are

preordained into rigid, rank-ordered castes that are fundamentally dissimilar from one another. The *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was censured by the Catholic church, yet along with other works of Renaissance humanism it was circulated among intellectual elites elsewhere in Europe and found purchase among a range of philosophical movements, some of which were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the heavy-handed ideological consensus being enforced by the dominant aristocratic elites and the cultural apparatus supporting them.

This dissatisfaction came to a head in the 18th century, when diverse streams of thought coalesced into the European Enlightenment. Many central intellectual figures in the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were inspired by the optimistic perspective on human nature that emerged in the Renaissance, and they adopted the view that most humans have the potential to develop into reasonable and capable individuals,[31] a potential that societies should safeguard by protecting individual *autonomy*. Many Enlightenment thinkers, further, became vocal critics of the prevailing order of aristocratic stratification, for they held that the caste system inherent to aristocratic inequality placed unfair constraints on individual potential and autonomy. This argument was made forcefully, for instance, by the influential philosopher Immanual Kant, who argued that all citizens of the same state should have formal *equality before the law* and *equality of opportunity* for social advancement:

> No member of the commonwealth can have a hereditary privilege as against his fellow subjects; and no one can hand down to his descendants the privileges attached to the rank he occupies in the commonwealth, nor act as if he were qualified as a ruler by birth and forcibly prevent others from reaching the higher levels of the hierarchy through their own merit. [...] He may not prevent his subordinates from raising themselves to his own level if they are able and entitled to do so by their talent, industry, and good fortune.[32]

While the gradual end of aristocratic stratification in Europe cannot be attributed to the spread of liberal humanism alone, the emergence of this new ideology did much to rob the aristocratic order of its symbolic legitimacy. It did so by undermining the claim made by aristocratic elites that they were naturally and fundamentally better than their subordinates. As argued by

[31] It must be noted, here, that while the central figures of the Enlightenment argued for protecting the potential and freedom of individuals, they for the most part only extended these protections to privileged majority groups.

[32] Cited in Khan (2011: 41), but originally stated by Kant in his essay "On the Common Saying: That May Be True in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice", published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1793.

Kant and by many of his contemporaries, members of the nobility had no right to monopolize elevated social positions if other members of society could equal or even surpass them in displaying the culturally valued traits that the aristocracy claimed to excel in. In other words, liberal ideologues insisted that personal quality and worth could not be assumed by blood and lineage alone, but that it ultimately should be proven through *competitions of merit*. This challenge was not limited to abstract intellectual debates: As Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb show in their book *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, the nobility lost its monopoly over powerful positions in European state bureaucracies in part because contenders from the bourgeois middle-classes lobbied for basing recruitment to such positions on perceived merit and talent rather than family pedigree alone (1972: 61ff). The tenets of liberal humanism were heavily contested by Europe's aristocratic regimes, but their influence over public culture ran deep. It seeped into the political landscape and lent symbolic power and impetus to the bourgeois revolutions of the early modern period, gradually prying open the hard caste systems of the past and heralding, at least notionally, a new social order in which class positions and status ranks could be *earned*, and not only inherited.

Liberal humanism was an emancipatory project, one that played an important role in undermining the dominance of aristocratic stratification in Europe. However, it did not do away with the logic of stratification entirely – it merely changed its shape. As argued by Sennett and Cobb, once it became culturally accepted that economic positions and status ranks should be allocated to those who realized their human potential through displays of merit, it also became acceptable to withhold resources and esteem from those who seemingly *failed* to make use of their potential (1972: 250). The proponents of liberal humanism did not see this as problematic in itself: The equality they advocated for was always an equality of opportunity, and not one of outcomes. We see this argued in the citation from Kant above: If a person in a hierarchical relationship has exerted more talent and effort or has had better fortune than someone lower in the hierarchy, then there is nothing unfair, in Kant's view, about them holding unequal resources and rank. In this sense, the social order that the liberal shift in European culture brought about was still a stratified one, but instead of the rigid caste inequality of the aristocratic past, it brought about a new form of *meritocratic inequality* (Feuchtwang 2018; Markovits 2019; Sandel 2020) – one in which people compete openly with one another for positions in society's rank orders and settle on the rung that befits their personal merits.

A succinct summation of this system of meritocratic inequality is found in the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, who strongly endorsed the liberal consensus emerging in Europe and America in the latter part of the 18th

century. As we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, Jefferson maintained that there exists a "natural aristocracy among men", which he defined as the "aristocracy of virtue and talents".[33] Echoing Mirandola's valorization of those who could capitalize on their human potential to develop great skill and moral excellence, Jefferson argued that a truly good society would only emerge when people of low character subordinated themselves to this meritorious elite. Among those of low character, he included both those who did not work to improve and elevate themselves, who he referred to derisively as "rubbish people" (Isenberg 2016: 91), but also the "artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth". These were the nobility of the Old World, clinging to their old-fashioned notions of lineage and caste, who Jefferson found to be pitiable and obsolete remnants of a bygone age. His vision for a good society was very much one of a stratified society, but in a form where resources and esteem flow upwards to the excellent and the ambitious, to those who could develop themselves into great and distinctive people, and not to those who simply had the good fortune of being born into a wealthy family.

Meritocratic inequality is not simply a fantasy dreamt up by ideologues and politicians, however. In his recent book *The Tyranny of Merit*, political philosopher Michael Sandel argues that the logic of meritocracy has seeped deep into the public culture of contemporary Western societies, fundamentally rewriting the way that we make sense of socioeconomic differences (2020). As Sandel points out, when we understand inequality as the product of meritocratic competition, we are led not only to think that elites hold positions of distinction because they have fairly earned them, but also to hold those in low class positions accountable for their misfortune (ibid: 25ff): Their deprivation might be regrettable, but in the moral universe of a meritocratic society, it reflects the just deserts of their lack of invested effort. Empirical research suggests that Sandel may well be right, for in societies across the world, people who believe strongly in a meritocratic narrative of socioeconomic achievement are more likely to tolerate economic disparities (Mijs & Savage 2020; Mijs 2021). However, meritocratic ideology influences not only how we understand the causes of socioeconomic inequalities, but also how we *evaluate* them. The cultural shift towards a valuation of merit, Sandel argues, coincided with increasing faith in the power of *human agency* (Haynes & Hickel 2018: 6-7; Sandel 2020: 40ff), brought about by the diffusion of *individualistic beliefs* through the Western world[34] (Dumont 1981; Chiu & Hong

[33] Quoted from the private correspondence of Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams dated October 18th 1813. Also see footnote 1.

[34] It should be noted that Sandel attributes the emergence of meritocratic ideology within Western culture not to the liberal turn of the Enlightenment, but rather to the

2007). Premodern societies often demonstrated a public belief that life was dictated by external and largely uncontrollable forces – the will of God, the whims of nature, or the inscrutable ways of fate – giving rise to an "ethics of fortune", in which people were expected to make peace with the constraints imposed upon them (Sandel 2020: 43). But from early modernity and onward, Western cultures increasingly began to shift towards a belief that individuals could control and shape their own lives, that humans were capable of mastering themselves and their circumstances by exercising their personal agency and rational faculties.[35] This gave rise, in turn, to an "ethics of mastery", in which people were expected to take *responsibility* for their place in life – and in which they were found wanting if they failed to overcome the constraints they faced (ibid.: 44).

These developments led, ultimately, to a change in the values that proliferated in the public culture of Western societies, elevating *rationality and ability* on the one hand and *personal agency* on the other into widely shared ideals. And as these values became entrenched in dominant culture, they increasingly came to structure the allocation of *esteem*, becoming the yardstick against which members of society evaluated one another, as Sennett and Cobb argue:

> One of the reasons class makes the doctrine of the Abbé de Sieyès unbelievable is that his humanism, and that of the other Enlightenment writers of both Right and Left, has a flaw at its center. […] The humanists effected a juncture between respect among men and a *potential* power all men had in the world. That is a

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diffusion of individualistic and providentialist beliefs within prevailing religious systems, a process which began, he argues, with the Christian Reformation and Protestant movements of the late Middle Ages (2020: 33ff). I argue that the religious and cultural developments traced by Sandel and the process of political and intellectual liberalization which I highlight should not be seen as competing explanations for the emergence of meritocratic thinking in Western culture, but rather as *complementary* explanations. They both reflect an underlying trend of increasing *individualization* in the organization of European societies, the belief systems proliferating in public culture, and the ethics of evaluation in interpersonal relations. I foreground the role of liberal humanist doctrine because of how prominently it advocates for allocating social rewards on the basis of competitions of merit, and because it was an explicitly political project attempting to reconfigure the social and cultural organization of society – with great success, one must say.

[35] One famous example of this trend is Immanuel Kant's statement that human ignorance is largely self-imposed by a lack of courage to throw off external guidance and seize control of one's own life and will, made in his essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784.

> fateful and risky step, as Nietzsche saw, for what happens to the mutual respect when men enact the potential within them? When the common potential is expressed in dissimilar ways? Surely those who are the most intelligent or able or competent have demonstrated more character in manifesting a potential that flows through all; don't they therefore deserve to be treated with more respect than others, or at least to be entrusted with more power? (Sennett & Cobb 1972: 255).

This long historical process has, I believe, contributed to the emergence of the status hierarchies of affluence, ability, and agency that we have seen demonstrated in this dissertation. In paper A, we saw that Danish adolescents believe that their society is characterized by evaluative criteria that closely resemble an "ethics of mastery": They believe that respect is allocated to the talented and the capable, and that those who seem to lack intellectual ability and who demonstrate a lethargic lack of willingness to develop their inner potential are held in low esteem. Centuries ago, Mirandola argued that we should be "impatient of mediocrity" and encourage one another to elevate ourselves to our fullest potential (2012: 8), and this call seems to have echoed down the annals of European history and found purchase in the status order of contemporary Denmark. Yet as we have also seen, young people do not believe that all people are equally possessed of ability and personal agency: As shown in paper B, adolescents learn to believe that people have equal opportunity for *developing* into agentic and capable people, but that some ultimately succeed in doing so while others fail. Within their peer systems this seemed to depend only on individual traits and attitudes, but in society at large, they had learned to think that the most capable and agentic people are found at the top of the class system while the least competent are found at the bottom. They had, in other words, adopted the central claim of the meritocratic ideology: That people climb the socioeconomic ladder because they exert and develop themselves, and that those who linger continuously in low class positions must in some way be personally *deficient*. They learn that ability and agency are the key values one should strive to cultivate, and that affluence is the just desert for those who succeed in doing so. They have learned that class inequality and status hierarchy are linked not because some people are born better than others, as the aristocratic inequality paradigm of old dictated, but rather because some people have justly earned their superiority over others.

Young people cannot, however, be faulted for having adopted this way of thinking, for they are hardly alone in holding it. Michael Sandel argues that contemporary Western societies are widely characterized by this tendency to honor personal merits while believing that class systems effectively function as ladders of merit, giving rise to "meritocratic hubris" among the higher classes and feelings of frustration and resentment among the lower classes (2020:

197ff). In their study of bitterness and despair among the American working class, Sennett and Cobb arrive at much the same conclusion, finding that modern Western culture is one that expects people from all class layers to live up to the same standards of worth while neglecting that the class system provides people with vastly different opportunities for doing so (1972: 74). What we learn from this present dissertation is that this distinctly classed status order also is reproduced by young people, by the cohorts of adolescents who constitute society's future. They play a crucial part in perpetuating and developing the paradigm of meritocratic inequality, fulfilling the role that, according to Paul Willis, young people have always played in human history (2003): They are the vanguard of cultural development, absorbing the dominant trends of their time and amplifying them. Exposed as they are to powerful doses of meritocratic messaging in popular culture (Carbone & Mijs 2022) and in the formative socialization they receive within educational systems (Goudeau & Cimpian 2021; Batruch et al. 2023), adolescents become "foot soldiers of meritocracy", carrying it with them through the beliefs they form in this tender and impressionable age. The emergence of meritocratic ideology was a radical moment in the cultural development of Western societies, one that provided emancipation and liberty from a cruel and deeply entrenched order of aristocratic tyranny, but which simultaneously gave rise to a whole new system of inequality and status hierarchization – and as long as society's young are taught to adopt the tents of this new order of stratification, we are unlikely to get rid of it.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Implications

Let a certain saving ambition invade our souls so that,
impatient of mediocrity, we pant after the highest things
and (since, if we will, we can)
bend all our efforts to their attainment.
- Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

This dissertation has investigated how adolescents make sense of the relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy – whether they think that one's chances of gaining esteem and respect from others is conditional on one's position on the class ladder. I have shown that many young people indeed do believe that these twin rank orders are closely linked with one another, and further, that they believe that *most people* think so. This suggests that the class-status linkage isn't something that adolescents have dreamt up, but rather a prevalent phenomenon they observe in the societies they live in. As told by the interview participants I have spoken with, it is mostly *adults* who care about what job people hold, how much money they make, and how hard they've worked to get where they are in life. To many young people, the linkage between class and status is taken as a fact of life, a thing that they simply have to adjust to as they mature and try to figure out what they must do to find a place of worth and value for themselves.

These claims have a number of significant implications that we need to consider here at the tail end of the dissertation – implications not only for the life and well-being of young people, but also for social and political dynamics in contemporary European societies at large.

6.1 Implications for Society

Much has been said about the relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy over the course of this dissertation, so much that it is pertinent to take a step back and ask why it *matters* that these twin systems of stratification have become so entangled in one another – why the linkage between social class and social status is a *problem* that we need to address. As I describe below, there are both normative and political reasons why the class-status linkage is a serious concern, one that we ignore at our own peril.

The need for social status is not a superficial one found only among narcissists and sycophants – it is a fundamental need common to all humans (Anderson et al. 2015), reflecting our desire to be seen as valuable and worthy by the people and communities we care about. This is why we become emotionally and physically distressed when we believe that others hold us in low esteem, to the point that it can seriously threaten our health and permanently undermine our well-being (Marmot 2004; Sapolsky 2004; Tang et al. 2016). In political philosophy and social theory, proponents of relational egalitarianism have long argued that a just society is one that provides all its members with equal opportunities for establishing relationships of equality with their fellow citizens (Anderson 1999) and highlighted how this pursuit of recognition and status equality has animated social conflict throughout human history (Honneth 1996). When a society's dominant status hierarchies are conditioned by the socioeconomic rank order of class inequality, a large part of its population is effectively locked out of acquiring esteem in public culture: All those who find themselves in lower class positions are told, directly and indirectly, that they are found to be deficient in the values that one must demonstrate to be a worthy person. These arguments show how the class-status linkage is a *normative* problem: Because it may inflict significant harm on a large segment of the population, and because it hinders relations of social equality between members of different class groups.

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, these two issues have persisted throughout history, arising whenever a linkage is formed between class inequality and status hierarchy within a society. Those in lower class groups often find themselves publicly labeled with derisive and demeaning terms such as "rubbish people", "rednecks", and "trash" (Isenberg 2016), and even though they often succeed in pushing back against such overt status discrimination through waves of popular mobilization (ibid.: 231ff), new forms of misrecognition will inevitably emerge so long as the underlying class-status linkage persists – and especially so long as this linkage is communicated to- and adopted by society's young. In the interviews I conducted with Danish adolescents, I was often struck by how openly my interview participants made use of quite demeaning language when speaking of people in lower class positions. Sebastian, a cheerful boy with a very optimistic attitude towards life, nonchalantly referred to manual routine jobs as "picking shit off the ground, a job that a normal person would never do". Lærke, who attended a predominantly upper-middle-class school, told that most of her classmates thought of educations at the vocational level as fit only for "someone who isn't good enough to make it in school, so they have to go play with dirt". Isabella, a highly assertive and driven girl, openly spoke of a clerk at a local shop as a

"disgusting bitch" who had done nothing with her life, and she referred to unemployed people as "losers" and "retards". As we see here, when adolescents come to learn that a person's class position reflects the degree to which they've developed the culturally valued traits that provide access to esteem, they become carriers of the class-status linkage and active agents of the deleterious effects it has on society.

In addition to the normative concerns that follow when social class and social status become linked to one another, the class-status linkage gives rise to a number of *political* issues that provide cause for alarm. When people are prevented from gaining access to valued positions in public culture, they tend to grow frustrated, bitter, and resentful of the prevailing social order (Gidron & Hall 2017; Engler & Weisstanner 2020; Van Noord et al. 2021). Michael Sandel argues forcefully that the rise of meritocratic ideology in Western culture is giving rise to a powerful backlash of mounting resentment and reactionary populism among people in lower class positions (2020: 71ff), for it construes the class ladder as a ladder of intelligence and work ethos and thereby elevates the highly educated and the successful into societal exemplars of ability and agency while exiling those employed in routine occupations to the periphery of low-status outsiders. One can hardly blame people for losing faith in a social order that only seems to reward their hard work with pity and scorn – and for latching on to any demagogue who promises them a new dawn where they again will feel the warmth of public esteem. The class-status linkage is, in other words, a powerful driver of social and political conflict, and while popular revolts have played a key role in moving Western societies towards greater equality in the past (Honneth 1996; Piketty 2022), they may herald a darker and less equitable social order in the future.

Reactions to the class-status linkage not only occur in the public arena of political struggle, however, but also in the private lives of individuals. This is especially true for young people, who are engaged in a constant process of self-exploration and self-cultivation (Kroger 2006): Like plants reaching for sunlight, adolescents attempt to develop themselves in such a way that they will be valued by others. Thus, when access to esteem becomes conditional on class position, it may have significant implications for the life trajectories of young people, as we will see below.

6.2 Implications for Young People

When Paul Willis conducted the ethnographic field work for his seminal book *Learning to Labour* in the 1970s, he documented many empirical patterns that have since become canon in the study of how class systems intersect with educational systems. Willis showed, among other things, that children from

working-class families often felt terribly ill at ease in school environments that saw them as deviant and deficient, and that they responded by constructing countercultures that make a virtue out of flaunting the authority and expectations of teachers and counselors. He also found that, at least in Great Britain, working-class boys sought refuge in the thought that they could escape to working-class occupations the moment their school tenure was up (Willis 2016: 99ff) – they had few illusions as to how hard and demanding such occupations could be, but they saw them as worthy pursuits that allowed them to garner respect through displays of masculine autonomy. Decades later, when fellow ethnographer Diane Reay conducted her incisive studies among underprivileged British youths in the 21st century, she found that they held very different notions: To them, working-class occupations seemed like hopeless dead-end jobs to be avoided at all costs, and they instead aspired for the highest reaches of the class system (Reay 2017: 96). As Reay details:

> Students told us "it's down to the individual how well you do at school", "you have to make yourself stand out compared to all other people doing the same exams", and "if you want to do well you just have to work really hard. You can't blame the school or your teachers". These young people were heavily invested in notions of the autonomous, self-reliant individual responsible for any future outcomes; we glimpse the ways in which symbolic domination works by making the individual responsible for their own success or failure, rather than recognising that some things are just not possible if you have virtually none of the necessary resources (ibid.)

The findings reported in this dissertation strongly support the observations made by Reay. As we saw in paper C, adolescents across Europe aspire overwhelmingly for reaching the highest rungs of the class ladder, no matter their own class origins and no matter their objective level of academic aptitude. Public culture has changed in between the time covered by Willis' study and our present age, and the occupational aspirations of young people have changed with it. This could perhaps be a reflection of increased materialism or a greater concern with achieving economic security: Adolescents in contemporary societies may simply be less willing to settle for the comparatively lower wages provided by jobs in the middle or the lower end of the class spectrum. But impressions provided by my interviews suggest that it may also reflect that young people increasingly think of occupations in the top of the class system as the only available emblems of esteem and achievement – as the best path forward for becoming a worthy and respectable person. In my interviews, I encountered only three adolescents who aspired for jobs at the routine or vocational level and saw these as interesting and valuable paths to take through life. While the majority of my interview participants still were unsure of which

occupational trajectory they were interested in, those who had clear occupational aspirations overwhelmingly aimed for highly placed professional and commercial careers. This included participants who hailed from homes where no parent held advanced academic credentials, whose dream jobs included occupations such as veterinarian, engineer, lawyer, and doctor. Their ideas for how to get into these highly ranked occupations were vague but vigorous: They weren't sure what sort of educations they needed to apply for, but they would figure that out down the line, and so long as they worked hard they would succeed. Personally, I hope that they do succeed – I wish them all the best, whatever the best might be for them. But I also cannot help but worry: What happens if they do not achieve the lofty goals they've set for themselves? If they, despite their best and most determined efforts, do not power through the many structural barriers in their way?

I do not mean to advocate for social reproduction – to say that working-class kids should stick to their lane and only get working-class jobs. But if young people learn to believe that they should strive for the heights of the class system to do well in life, and that it is mainly their own willpower that determines their chances of success, then some of them may be in for a rude awakening if they ultimately land in positions in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. As argued by Michael Sandel, the dark corollary of the meritocratic ideals of personal responsibility and self-mastery is the burden of holding oneself accountable for every gambit that does not succeed, every dream that does not come true (2020: 34). In a time when the health and well-being of children and adolescents are burdened by a great many issues, we may be placing further strain on them by leading them into a race for socioeconomic distinction that some of them, ultimately, are far more likely to win than others. In addition, we lead them away from middle- and working-class occupations that are deeply valuable to society and which are also, when given the renumeration and esteem they deserve, meaningful and rewarding vocations that adolescents might thrive and prosper in. So long as social class and social status remain linked with one another, it may not only do harm to the societies we live in, but also to the young people who constitute their future.

English Summary

Throughout history, two systems of stratification have cut through societies and divided their members against one another: Class inequality in resource affluence on the one hand, and status hierarchies of social standing and esteem on the other. While each of these rank orders give rise to a number of deep and dangerous issues on their own, their deleterious effects on our lives and our communities are compounded when they become entangled in one another – when our social worth and dignity becomes conditional on our position in the class system.

Scholars from across a wide array of disciplines have long struggled to understand how, when, and why social class and social status become linked to each other, yet in all these investigations, they have seldom thought to ask one important social group: *Adolescents*. This is, I claim, a serious oversight, for none pay so close attention to hierarchies of status and prominence as teenagers do. As a developmental period, adolescence is characterized by elevated sensitivity to influence from and evaluation by others, rendering adolescents particularly attentive to rank orders of status in the communities they are part of. This means, in brief, that we can learn much about the nature of the relationship between social class and social status by investigating how adolescents perceive and make sense of it. In this dissertation, I attempt to address this oversight by investigating how young people maturing into contemporary European societies make sense of the relationship between class inequality and status hierarchy in the societies they live in, in the communities of same-age peers they interact with on a daily basis, and in the labor market that they will one day become part of.

Over the course of the dissertation, I combine different theoretical and analytical approaches to tackle this question from multiple angles. I first set out to investigate whether adolescents in Denmark generally believe that their society is host to class inequalities and status hierarchies, or whether they tend to be unaware of the social divisions that surround them. Through a detailed interview study with adolescent participants recruited from four different and diverse school environments, I show that young people not only believe that socioeconomic stratification and status hierarchization proliferates in Danish society, but that they also are convinced that a person's social status depends quite strongly on their class position. As told by the interviewed adolescents, one must display three traits to gain respect in Denmark: An *affluent lifestyle* characterized by luxury consumption and economic freedom, high *personal ability and intelligence*, and an *agentic orientation* towards life marked by

ambition and a willingness to exert great effort to achieve one's goals. The interview participants had further learned to think that people in elevated class positions – the wealthy, the highly educated, and those with advanced and prestigious careers – excel in these three traits, while people in low class positions – the poor, the unemployed, and those performing manual and routine work – generally tend to lack them, leading them to believe that adult society in Denmark is characterized by a strong class gradient in status.

I secondly examine whether young people tend to carry this linkage between social class and social status with them into a deeply important aspect of their lives: The hierarchies of popularity that emerge among the same-age peers they interact with every day. Adolescents are deeply sensitive to the way they are evaluated and ranked by one another, and their status interactions with peers give rise to durable beliefs about how they must be in order to hold a place of worth among others. Utilizing an in-depth interview study with adolescents in Denmark, I find that young people tend to hold ambiguous and complex beliefs as to the role that class inequalities play in status hierarchies among peers. Among the interviewed adolescents, the consensus was that class disparities *can* matter for one's status among peers, but that socioeconomic disadvantages can be overcome by displaying powerful self-confidence and autonomy, for example by acting with initiative in peer relations and flaunting adult authority by engaging in provocative risk behaviors. Young people learn, in other words, that one's social class can matter for one's social standing, but that it ultimately is up to oneself to push through such obstacles and attain status through the strength of one's personality.

In a third and final study, I look at how young people make sense of the interaction between social class and social status in the labor market, by investigating how they envision their *own* position in the occupational class system of the society they live in. Using a statistical analysis of data from England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, I show that young people who display high levels of *self-efficacy*, indicating that they think of themselves as capable and driven people with control over their own lives, are far more likely to aspire for jobs located at the top of the class system than ones in the middle or the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. This indicates that adolescents throughout Europe have come to think of the class ladder as representing a hierarchy of competence and effort, where the most competent and skilled people sit at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid while the inept and the incapable settle on the lower rungs.

Taken together, these findings show that many young people growing up in contemporary European societies come to believe that social class and social status are closely linked with one another – and further, that they believe that this is widely acknowledged and accepted by most people, including most

adults. The dissertation therefore indicates that class inequality and status hierarchy remain deeply entwined even in affluent, liberal-democratic societies, and that this class-status linkage weighs heavily on adolescents who are struggling to find a place of worth of themselves in these societies.

Dansk resumé

På tværs af verdenshistorien har samfund ofte været gennemsyret af to former for ulighed, der inddeler deres borgere og vender dem mod hinanden: Ressourcebaseret *klasseulighed* på den ene hånd, og *statushierarkier* baseret på social anerkendelse på den anden hånd. Disse to rangordener kan give anledning til dybe samfundsproblemer hver for sig, men deres skadelige effekter bliver forstærket og forværret når de bliver viklet ind i hinanden – for når vores sociale værdighed bliver bestemt af vores socioøkonomiske position i klassesystemet, vil store dele af samfundet komme til at opleve, at de ikke værdsættes og beundres af deres medborgere.

Forskere har længe kæmpet for at forstå hvordan, hvornår, og hvorfor sociale klasseskel og sociale statushierarkier bliver forbundne med hinanden, men i langt de fleste undersøgelser har de sjældent tænkt på at spørge en vigtig del af samfundet: Unge mennesker. Dette er en alvorlig udeladelse, for ingen er så opmærksomme på- og sårbare over for statushierarkier som teenagere. Ungdomsårene er kendetegnet ved en øget følsomhed over for social påvirkning og evaluering, og af den grund arbejder unge ihærdigt på at forstå, hvordan de skal være for at opnå værdi i andres øjne, hvilket gør dem til en slags eksperter i at forstå samfundets mange statushierarkier. Vi kan derfor finde ud af, om klasseskel og statushierarkier stadigvæk er koblede med hinanden i moderne europæiske samfund, ved at undersøge hvorvidt unge oplever en sådan kobling. I denne afhandlinger forsøger jeg at undersøge netop dette: Hvordan unge mennesker forstår forholdet mellem klasseulighed og statushierarkier i deres samfund, blandt deres jævnaldrende, og på det arbejdsmarked, som de engang selv skal træde ind i.

Afhandlingen undersøger dette spørgsmål fra flere teoretiske og analytiske vinkler, for at danne et bredspektret og nuanceret billede af hvordan nutidige unge forstår forholdet mellem social klasse og social status. Som et første skridt undersøges det, om unge i Danmark mener, at deres samfund i det hele taget er præget af klasseulighed og statushierarkier. Gennem en dybdegående interviewundersøgelse med unge deltagere fra fire forskelligartede skolemiljøer viser jeg, at unge mennesker i Danmark er overbeviste om at der findes både socioøkonomiske klasseskel og sociale statushierarkier i det danske samfund, og at mange af dem mener at disse to rangordener er tæt forbundne med hinanden. Specifikt oplever deltagerne i dette interviewstudie, at man skal udvise tre karaktertræk for at opnå anerkendelse i nutidens Danmark: En livsstil præget af velstand og økonomisk frihed, et højt niveau af personlig kompetence og intelligens, og en personlighed præget af ambition og handlekraft.

Danske unge oplever desuden, at de fleste voksne mener, at disse tre karaktertræk typisk findes i højere grad blandt personer i høje klasse positioner: De velstående, de højtuddannede, og personer med prestigefyldte karrierer. Af den grund er mange unge i Danmark overbeviste om, at der findes en direkte forbindelse mellem en persons klasseposition og den status de har i samfundet.

Som et næste skridt i afhandlingen kigger jeg på, hvordan danske unge forstår forholdet mellem social klasse og social status i en vigtig del af deres liv: De popularitetshierarkier, der opstår blandt de jævnaldrende som de interagerer med på daglig basis. Unge er i høj grad følsomme over for den måde de bliver evalueret og rangeret af hinanden, og derfor former deres statusinteraktioner med jævnaldrende deres indtryk af hvilken slags person de er nødt til at være, for at vinde anerkendelse blandt andre mennesker. Ved hjælp af endnu en interviewundersøgelse foretaget blandt unge i Danmark viser jeg, at de fleste unge opfatter forholdet mellem klasseskel og status blandt jævnaldrende som tvetydigt og komplekst. Blandt de interviewede unge var der enighed om, at klasseulighed *kan* spille en rolle for ens status blandt jævnaldrende, men mange af dem var samtidigt overbeviste om, at man kan overvinde sådanne socioøkonomiske barriere ved at opføre sig på den rigtige måde. Specifikt insisterer mange unge på, at man altid kan vinde status ved at udvise selvtillid og autonomi, for eksempel ved at tage en ledende og handlekraftig rolle i gruppeinteraktioner, eller ved at trodse de voksens autoritet ved at kaste sig ud i provokerende risikoadfærd. Unge mennesker lærer således hinanden, at ens klasseposition kan være udslagsgivende for ens sociale status, men at det i sidste ende er op til én selv at overvinde dette problem ved at udvise selvtillid og ved at opbygge en slagkraftig personlighed. På den måde socialiserer unge hinanden til at stræbe efter at blive handlekraftige og selvstændige individer.

I afhandlingens tredje og sidste undersøgelse efterforsker jeg hvordan unge mennesker forstår koblingen mellem social klasse og social anseelse på arbejdsmarkedet. Som vinkel ind i dette kigger jeg på, hvordan unge forestiller sig deres *egen* fremtidige position i samfundets klassesystem, ved at analysere hvilket socioøkonomisk trin deres drømmejob befinder sig på. Ved hjælp af en statistisk analyse af data fra England, Tyskland, Holland og Sverige viser jeg, at de fleste unge drømmer om at få et job der er placeret i samfundets højere klasselag, og at dette i særdeleshed er gældende for unge, der tænker på sig selv som dygtige og driftige mennesker, der har kontrol over deres eget liv. Undersøgelsen viser, at unge der har en høj grad af selvtillid og selvstændighed er betydeligt mere tilbøjelige til at stræbe efter jobs i toppen af klassesystemet end jobs der er placeret i midten eller i den lavere ende af det socioøkonomiske spektrum. Dette tyder på, at unge på tværs af Europe ser klassesystemets socioøkonomiske rangorden som et hierarki baseret på kompetence

og indsats, hvor de dygtigste mennesker sidder i toppen af klassepyramiden, mens inkompetente og usikre mennesker lander i bunden.

Samlet viser disse resultater, at mange unge mennesker i nutidige europæiske samfund tror, at den sociale status de vil få når de bliver voksne afhænger af den klasseposition som de kan opnå, og at denne klasseposition afhænger af deres egen handlekraft, selvstændighed, og kompetencer. Afhandlingen indikerer derfor, at klasseulighed og statushierarkier stadigvæk er dybt sammenflettede i moderne samfund, med store konsekvenser for unge der forsøger at finde deres plads i disse samfund.

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