

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF STATUS INEQUALITIES:

WHY IS IT EVERYWHERE? WHY DOES IT MATTER?



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Abstract: Status, which is based on differences in esteem and honor, is an ancient and universal form of inequality which nevertheless interpenetrates modern institutions and organizations. Given its ubiquity and significance, we need to better understand the basic nature of status as a form of inequality. I argue that status hierarchies are a cultural invention to organize and manage social relations in a fundamental human condition: cooperative interdependence to achieve valued goals with nested competitive interdependence to maximize individual outcomes in the effort. I consider this claim in relation to both evolutionary arguments and empirical evidence. Evidence suggests that the cultural schema of status is two-fold, consisting of a deeply learned basic norm of status allocation and a set of more explicit, variable, and changing common knowledge status beliefs that people draw on to coordinate judgments about who or what is more deserving of higher status. The cultural nature of status allows people to spread it widely to social phenomena (e.g., firms in a business field) well beyond its origins in interpersonal hierarchies. I argue the association of status with social difference groups (e.g., race, gender, class-as-culture) gives inequalities based on those difference groups an autonomous, independent capacity to reproduce themselves through interpersonal status processes.

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