

Education-Based Status in Comparative Perspective: The Legitimization of Education as a Basis for Social Stratification

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Classical and recent accounts of education posit that education legitimately, and authoritatively, classifies individuals to positions of lower or higher status. However, despite these general theoretical claims, empirical evidence that provides an in-depth picture of the relationship between educational attainment and social status remains scarce. In this paper, based on a dataset of 31 countries (International Social Survey Programme), we investigate the extent to which education is related to subjective social status, the degree to which this is seen as legitimate, and how this relationship varies between countries. We contextualize this relationship with the influence of the centrality of education in countries (operationalized as the share of higher educated). Results showed that education is an important source of subjective social status for individuals across all countries, and is seen as relatively legitimate and uncontroversial among all educational groups. Moreover, among those who perceive education to be more important for status, subjective status differences between educational groups are larger. Additionally, in countries with larger shares of higher educated, educational differences in subjective social status correlate more strongly with whether or not people obtained a degree of higher (tertiary) education. Lastly, the relationship between education and subjective social status in these countries is more independent from other sources of status, such as income and gender. It therefore seems to be that as higher education becomes more central and widely shared in a society, rather than leveling social differences, ironically it also becomes more distinctive and diagnostic in distinguishing people along group lines.

Western societies are increasingly organized around the principle that social position should be *acquired* instead of *ascribed*. This meritocratic ideal defines a society where individuals gain their place in societal hierarchy through their *merit* (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Young 1958). From the start, education has been central to this principle (Baker 2014; Meyer 1977). Thus, in practice, and despite persistent social reproduction in education, merit is often defined as

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educational attainment and hence educational qualifications functions as the basis for the distribution of status and symbolic power in society (Bourdieu 1984; Solga 2002; Tannock 2008). In this way, educational credentials are not only used to classify people, they also do this in an “authoritative way” (cf. Meyer 1977).

Given these arguments, obtaining an educational degree can be seen as a *rite of passage* that may have a strong influence on how people see themselves and their social status. However, how and how much individuals themselves experience the resulting status differences between educational groups, and how this differs between countries, has been scarcely investigated. While education plays a central role in status attainment processes, these processes concern themselves primarily with “objective” status (e.g., occupational status, income). While our understanding of subjective social status is more fully outlined below, we refer to subjective social status as people’s individual perception of their social standing. Subjective social status is related but not identical to objective social status, and has independent attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014; D’Hooge, Achterberg, and Reeskens 2018). Investigating this subjective side of status indicators such as education gives a clearer idea on how people appreciate the social positions that make up these indicators, apart from how societal institutions provide individuals in these positions with certain tangible benefits or disadvantages. As such, investigating subjective social status, as distinct from objective social status, allows us to add to the growing literature around the manifestation and consequences of the lived experience and the subjective understanding of education-based classification (Solga 2002; Spruyt and Kuppens 2015; Tannock 2008).

Therefore, in this paper, we investigate: (1) how education is related to subjective social status, (2) the legitimacy of such an “education-based meritocracy” (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Goldthorpe 2003), and (3) how the relationship between education and subjective social status is moderated by the centrality of education across different countries. For this, we rely on cross-sectional data from 31 countries of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). We add to the existing literature in three ways: (1) this is one of the first studies that bridges the space between the institutional theories of education and the attitudes of individuals by investigating the empirical relationship between subjective social status and education in a large number of countries; (2) we broaden the analysis of social status by bringing legitimacy into the picture: education-based status is *legitimate* status; (3) we analyze this education-based status comparatively, by assessing to what extent and how the general association between education and status varies over contexts.

Educational Classification and Subjective Social Status

Central to most theoretical accounts of education is the idea that education *authoritatively* and *legitimately* allocates individuals to social positions, whereby diplomas and certificates function as the institutionally guaranteed means, or *capital*, for entering and maintaining these positions (Baker 2014; Bourdieu

1984; Meyer 1977). As such, education is considered an institution that produces and reproduces a social hierarchy based on educational achievement so that in contemporary societies “[...] *everybody knows and everybody knows that everybody else knows that education rules in modern society*’ (Kingston et al. 2003, 55).

Education occupies a prominent position in the research into status attainment processes (Blau and Duncan 1967; Breen and Jonsson 2005). Here education is seen as the main vehicle for both the reproduction of inequality and intergenerational mobility (Hout and DiPrete 2006). The status attainment literature primarily focuses “objective” social status (e.g., income). Subjective experiences of (educational) status are the natural complement of such research as these feelings play a pivotal role in legitimizing the role of education. Subjective social status both comprises an idea of the social stratification system and a person’s individual location within it (Evans and Kelley 2004). Based on the tradition of research inspired by social identity theory, we know that (1) people’s subjective social status and identity are related but do not always correspond exactly with objective characteristics of their social position and (2) these subjective perceptions have independent attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014; D’Hooge, Achterberg, and Reeskens 2018). This “distortion” between subjective perception and objective social position might have different sources such as basing one’s perception on a, more local, reference group rather than an entire society (Evans and Kelley 2004), or some people might perceive one factor or characteristic to be more important for social status than other people do (e.g., appreciating education to a greater extent than other people). In other words, though education plays a strong allocating role, by distributing people to certain societal positions, what remains equally relevant, both in general and as part of this allocating role, is how society understands the role of education.

Part of education’s importance in current societies derives from the fact that differences in educational achievement are represented as *legitimate*. Baker (2014), for example, argues that education has transformed into a “primary institution” that has a profound cultural influence in modern societies, such as notions of personal success and failure. Similarly, Bourdieu has argued that education institutionalizes highly individualistic conceptions of the self that fit within a more general “ideology of the gift,” “wherein educational outcomes are presented as the result of superior and natural qualities” (Reed-Danahay 2005, 48), and explanations concerning social background are downplayed. As such, the explanations or attributions of academic success (Mijs 2016a; Warikoo and Fuhr 2014) are fully in accord with the meritocratic ideal that sees success as the outcome of talent and hard work.

Educational credentials are institutionalized proof of not only one’s individual talent, ambition, and competence (Bourdieu 1984, 1989, 20–21), but also the moral implications of these achievements (Sayer 2005; Tannock 2008). These positive moral implications of educational achievement are visible in public discourse, where education is often presented as a “universal problem solver” for both individual and societal problems (Depaepe and Smeyers 2008; Spruyt

2012). When education is posited as having the social responsibility to solving society's problems, it is through more schooling and education that individuals need to be trained or adapted to a situation wherein such problems do not arise. As such, regardless of its actual efficaciousness, a higher education is seen as most desirable, whereas social problems are associated with a *lack* of education (Labaree 2008).

However, valuing higher education is not the only factor for distributing education-based social status, it also requires the awareness of one's own position, and the possibility to be classified and to classify others (Ridgeway 1991; Spruyt and Kuppens 2015). Where characteristics such as race/ethnicity or gender are highly visible, education per se is not. However, there is ample reason to assume that such awareness and a realistic possibility for educational classification exists. First, especially in societies with a highly stratified educational system, educational classification begins at an early age, inducing awareness of one's position at an equally early age (Mijs 2016a; Van Houtte and Stevens 2008). Classification does not end there: education functions as a gatekeeper to various social locations after schooling, such as in the labor market (Kingston et al. 2003; Meyer 1977). People are thus confronted with their own position in the educational hierarchy on a regular basis. Research into education-based identity has indeed demonstrated that individuals identify with their own educational level, showing that such awareness exists at more than a mere superficial level (Kuppens et al. 2015; Stubager 2009). Secondly, differences between more and less educated individuals in political attitudes, political behavior, and cultural tastes are abundant (Bennett et al. 2009; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2007; Stubager 2009; Van der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007). As such, while educational position itself might not always be visible to others, its consequences and correlates are. Individuals in modern societies are thus likely to be aware of their own position and relationship to others in the educational hierarchy.

According to these arguments, the result is a relatively uncontroversial, legitimate social hierarchy based on educational attainment. Against that background, it is remarkable that research on the effects of education remains narrowly focused on the specific knowledge, skills, resources, and attitudes that education is supposed to transmit (Easterbrook, Kuppens, and Manstead 2016; Kingston et al. 2003). The effect of education on social status, beyond the occupational structure, has hitherto rarely been investigated. This effect is not so much related to the content of curricula but rather results from the social value of educational credentials/distinctions in society at large. This is all the more noteworthy given that previous research into subjective social status has mentioned the possibility that education functions as more than an indicator for socioeconomic status. Poppitz (2016) refers to a discussion of Bourdieu's class analysis, focusing on the classificatory elements of education, and Lindemann and Saar (2014) mention the possibility of the stigmatization of the less educated. In fact, the studies that *have* included education in their analyses of subjective social status (i.e., Evans and Kelley 2004; Lindemann and Saar 2014; Poppitz 2016) have demonstrated that education is positively related to

subjective social status. This lends support for our first assertion that education is an independent source of status.

Beyond demonstrating the general relationship between education and social status in a large number of countries, we attempt to take the discussion two steps further. Firstly, we investigate to what extent this relationship between education and social status possesses legitimacy in the eyes of individuals. The perceived legitimacy of status differences affects how individuals evaluate those with high and low status, and how they are likely to react to being confronted with status differences (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). Secondly, we investigate whether the education-status relationship depends on people's own perception of education-based meritocracy. Are education and subjective social status more strongly related among those who perceive such a relationship to exist in society? If education itself is a source of status, we expect this stronger relationship to be particularly the case among those who perceive that educational credentials are important to get ahead in their country. The role of the perception of education-based meritocracy would suggest that people are aware of this mechanism, and such awareness of course has important consequences for how individuals cope with status differences.

Cross-National Variation in the Centrality of Education

The extent to which education is a source of status is likely to vary between countries, and to depend on the extent to which education has taken this central role in a society. Crucial to the notion of the *Schooled Society* (Baker 2014) is that the institution of education exerts a powerful influence on society. The most important agent of this is higher education, and in particular, the university, which, according to Baker, produces “the very ideology and beliefs that underpin the experienced reality of modern society” (2014, 59). The societal impact of higher education as an institution reaches beyond its own students, but the *share* of higher educated individuals can be seen as an indication of the increasing role of education in society: “the massification of the university, [is] a major driving force in intensifying the power of the institution in modern society” (Ibid, 61). Consequently, it is likely that the relationship between education and subjective social status will undergo significant changes due to the increasing size of the higher educational system.

But what are these changes likely to be? Two contradictory tendencies may be relevant here concerning the *strength* of the relationship of education with subjective social status. On the one hand, as recent literature on the “educational cleavage” has asserted, education is growing into a structural basis for an ideological conflict, central to modern politics (Bovens and Wille 2017; Stubager 2009, 2013). Implying that this would consequently lead to a stronger effect of education on subjective social status. On the other hand, as higher education expands and a larger proportion of the population is educated to a higher level, the distinctiveness of a higher degree diminishes (Brown 2003; Tholen 2016). This would mean that it would be more difficult to differentiate an individual based on his/her educational achievements. Given that these mechanisms might

work in opposite directions, it is interesting to investigate whether the strength of the relationship between education and subjective social status increases or decreases with the share of higher educated in society.

Besides the strength of the relationship between education and subjective social status, two other aspects—namely: (1) the exact shape the relationship takes and (2) the extent to which educational differences overlap with other sources of status differences (e.g., income differences)—are worth studying. Firstly, the *shape* of the relationship might change when (higher) education expands. Although the distinctiveness of higher education might diminish, its visibility increases with prevalence. As such, lower and middle educated might increasingly compare themselves primarily to higher educated, rather than positioning themselves in a proportional hierarchy. As Easterbrook, Kuppens and Manstead note in their investigation of the “education effect” on various social indicators, that “...whether or not one has a tertiary education qualification therefore seems to be an important divide in many contemporary societies” (Easterbrook, Kuppens, and Manstead 2016, 1291). It is possible that this depends in part on the size of tertiary education. The result would be that having, or not having, a tertiary education is the key factor in understanding the educational effect on subjective status in countries with a larger share of people with a higher education. The expansion of higher education also affects the prevalence and visibility of less educated. As societies undergo an expansion of higher education, fewer people are less educated. This, however, might have a detrimental effect on the less educated who see their social value diminished, not only through a lower number of people like them but also by “negative selection” and stigmatization of the lower educated (Solga 2002). This would primarily lead to a strong decline in social status among lower educated.

A second aspect of the relationship between education and subjective social status that is worth investigating is the extent to which it is *independent* from other factors (e.g., income). Though the independence of the association of education might appear to be related to the strength of the effect of education, this is not necessarily so. In the case of a growing centrality of education, individuals might see themselves increasingly through the lens of their educational achievements. This might lead to that the education effect would to a greater extent be independently based on education per se, rather than on related factors such as income. Analyses of cultural/political attitudes, for example, have demonstrated that in more (post-)modern societies, attitudes are increasingly related more to education than to (economic) class indicators (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2007). Similar analyses also note the development of a “cultural cleavage” (as opposed to an economic cleavage) that predominantly revolves around attitudes strongly linked to education, rather than income (Achterberg and Houtman 2009; Van der Waal et al. 2007). As such, the association between education and subjective social status might overlap less with the effect of other factors such as income, and is hence more independent of these factors.

To sum up, we will test the following hypotheses: (1) education will be a source of status for individuals, (2) this status will be relatively uncontested and seen as legitimate, (3) individuals that believe that education is important to get

ahead in their society will be more sensitive to educational differences in their subjective social status. Next, we will explore the effect of the increase of the centrality/expansion of higher education on the strength, shape, and independence of the relationship of education with subjective social status.

Data and Methodology

To answer our research questions, we relied on data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). ISSP is a cross-national collaboration on nationally representative surveys, which includes a large number of countries, with an average number of respondents of about 1,500 per country (<http://www.issp.org>). The surveys include demographic questions, which are repeated across all waves, and a separate substantial module that varies from year to year. This is cross-sectional data, so while our theoretical model implies causal relationships, we are not able to test for causality. We focused on subjective social status (SSS), which is included in the demographic section and is thus repeated over the years. Pooling subsequent waves gives us additional benefits apart from a larger number of observations at the macro-level. Most importantly, the subsequent waves serve as a replication for each other. While it is possible, or even likely, that one or two waves deviate from the trend, if the same pattern is observed in multiple waves this strengthens the likelihood of observing a “true” trend. While preparing this paper we checked whether the results we present below can be replicated. The results were similar in each wave and led to the same substantive conclusions. An additional benefit is the greater number of respondents, which is useful in stabilizing the measurements—however, this also increases the statistical power to such an extent that even very small correlations will be statistically significant. For this reason, we focus primarily on effect size.

Our research questions mainly pertain to phenomena in western societies. Hence, we focused only on the European countries and Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. This set of countries contains a large amount of variation on relevant characteristics, but within a certain cultural similarity. Additionally, for these countries, sufficient data availability is assured. Though the number of countries differs per wave, across all waves this amounts to 31 countries in total. The surveys within each ISSP wave are not held at a similar time and can sometimes be multiple years apart. We chose to code all year-country combinations (called *sample(s)* henceforth) according to the year of fieldwork. Thus, although we have taken waves 2006 through 2014, the year range is 2005–2016.¹ Furthermore, in some surveys, respondents were presented with multiple ISSP rotating modules in one questionnaire. These modules were separately published in different waves, each time duplicating the respondents. In pooling the dataset, we removed 29 duplicate samples that were created in this way. Additionally, the fieldwork of some surveys were held in the same year. Our coding based on fieldwork year causes these two samples to be merged into one sample. This resulted in a further reduction of 23 surveys. Since all our analyses focus on the item for subjective social status, we have also removed the

seventeen samples that do not include this question. This left us with 142 samples in 31 countries.

In addition to the pooled survey, we also employed the 2009 wave, which includes the most recent Social Inequality module, separately. This module contains several measurements, only available in this module, concerning education-based meritocracy (see *Measurements*-section below). As explained below, we excluded all respondents with missing values on SSS and education, and all respondents older than 75. Some countries have opted for an upper limit of 75 in their sample, hence we opted for a maximum age limit of 75 to ensure similar samples. This left us with a total of 195,755 respondents over 31 countries, and in total 142 samples.

Measurements

Our most important measurements are the aforementioned SSS and *education*. In order to ascertain respondents' position in society, we needed an item that inquired about an individual's position in society in an open and general sense. The SSS item included in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) served this purpose. This item is worded as follows: "*In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale?*" It presents the respondents with a (vertical) ladder with ten boxes, where they have to check the box which corresponds to their (perceived) position. Higher scores indicate higher SSS. This question does not prime respondents to judge their position in terms of a specific characteristic (e.g., income, labor market status, education). Due to its abstract nature, it leaves the basis for the subjective position for the respondent to determine (Evans and Kelley 2004; Lindemann and Saar 2014; Poppitz 2016). This has the additional benefit of being more comparable across cultures.

Education is measured in three categories: low, middle, and high, which refer respectively to lower secondary (or less), secondary, and tertiary diplomas. Those still in education were excluded from the analysis.² As explained earlier, we focused on categories (rather than years of schooling) because it is the credentials that are institutionally guaranteed gatekeepers. Indeed, compared to other forms of capital, education credentials and degrees introduce sharp distinctions rather than mere gradients between groups (Sayer 2005, 79).

The next three variables at the individual level are *income*, *age*, and *gender*. These were added as control variables. *Income* is measured differently across countries using different currencies, number and sizes of income brackets, in some surveys gross income and in others net income is used, some refer to monthly income, others to yearly. To circumvent these differences, we have opted to standardize all income measurements to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 within samples. *Age* was restricted to 75 and below. *Gender* was measured dichotomously, where the value of 1 refers to female and 0 to male.

In addition to the individual variables, we have also included variables at the country level. The values on these variables differ between countries and over

time. The first variable is *share of higher educated*, which we include as a measurement for the centrality of education/educational expansion, and thus particularly to investigate to what extent the effect of education on SSS differs across countries. This is measured with the % of 25–64 year olds who have attained a tertiary diploma. As for all contextual variables, data were added for samples, and thus vary between countries and between years within countries. See table A1 in the appendix for data sources.

Furthermore, we added a range of control variables that might confound the influence of the share of higher educated. As educational expansion is largest in economically developed countries (Schofer and Meyer 2005), it raises the possibility that the effect of the share of higher educated is confounded by factors of economic development. Thus, we added contextual variables that control for this possibility. These variables are *gross domestic product per capita*, *government expenses*, *income inequality*, *share of employment in service sector (as % of total employment)*. In addition, previous studies have noted the importance of these variables for cross-national differences in SSS, such as GDP per capita and income inequality (Evans and Kelley 2004; Poppitz 2016). Other studies have documented the relevance of these factors for changes in subjective consequences in (educational) stratification, for example post-modernization, measured using GDP per capita, and share of employment in service sector (cf. Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2007). Lastly, we also add government expenses as a control, as countries with larger shares of higher educated often have larger welfare states, which might flatten out differences between social groups, and hence perceptions of status.

For all these contextual variables, data were available for most countries and most years. However, for two variables interpolation was used to fill missing data. This linear interpolation was used only when four or fewer consecutive years were missing. We calculated 21 and 22 values in three and seven countries³ for share of higher educated individuals, and income inequality respectively.

In the 2009 ISSP wave, we focused on two additional variables to examine the extent to which education is a legitimate basis for stratification in society. We focused on two measures that were previously used as measures for (education-based) meritocracy (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Mijs 2016b). These focus on how respondents see education as a basis for success in society and to what extent they deem education as a legitimate basis for success. The first item is: “Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life... how important is having a good education yourself?” The second item is: “In deciding how much people ought to earn, how important should each of these things be, in your opinion... the number of years spent in education and training?” We labeled these items about the importance of education *perceived* and *desired education-based meritocracy*, respectively. These concepts of education-based meritocracy refer solely to the extent to which individuals perceive, or desire, educational merits to be the basis for societal success, regardless of whether education is itself meritocratic or whether education is actually the basis for success. Both are measured from 1–5 where 1 means “Not

important at all” and 5 “*Essential*”. All other variables (e.g., education, income) in the 2009 wave were operationalized similarly as in the pooled dataset.

In table 1 we list all employed variables with descriptive statistics.

Results

The results are presented in three steps. Firstly, we focus on the general association between education and subjective social status. The explanatory power of education is used to assess the general strength and the cross-national variation of this pattern, and provides the background for further steps in the analysis. Next, we focus on the legitimacy of these status differences. To that end, we assess the perceived relative importance of education when compared with other

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Individual level</i>					
Subjective social status	195,775	5.58	1.73	1	10
Education	195,775	2.00	0.83	1	3
Low	67,760				
Middle	59,494				
High	68,521				
Income	154,336	0.05	1	-2.50	27.70
Age	195,775	47.34	15.17	15	75
Gender (1 = female)	195,754	0.53		0	1
<i>Year-country level</i>					
Share of higher educated ^a	126	30.95	8.00	13.48	52.97
GDP per capita	142	36,750.84	11,180.39	15,739.98	67,428.54
Income inequality (Gini) ^b	97	30.73	3.72	24.48	41.37
Share of labor force in service sector	132	69.76	6.83	54.40	81.20
Government expenses	142	45.29	7.06	30.01	58.06
Countries	31				
Year-country combinations	142				
<i>ISSP 2009 wave (Social Inequality)</i>					
Perceived education-based meritocracy	25,497	3.89	0.85	1	5
Desired education-based meritocracy	25,259	3.51	0.88	1	5

Note: list-wise deletion on subjective social status and education. ^aBulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, New Zealand have no values for any years. ^bNew Zealand has no values for any years.

characteristics to get ahead in life, *and* the level of disagreement between educational groups on this point. In the third step, we introduce a comparative element by exploring and explaining how perceptions and desires of the legitimacy of educational differences is related to SSS, and the differences between countries and years in these patterns. The results of multilevel analyses are listed in the appendix (tables A2–A4). These multilevel models are specified with three separate levels: individuals, years, and countries (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016).

Explanatory Power of Education for Subjective Social Status

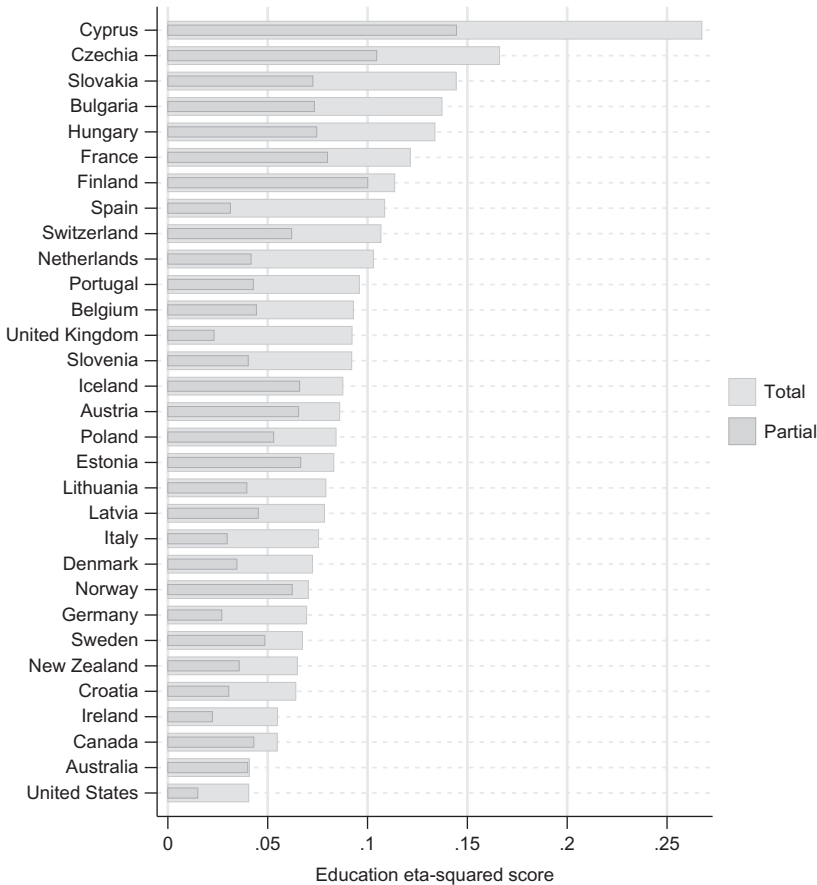
In the first step of the analysis, we attempt to get a general overview of the extent to which education predicts self-assessed social status, and to what extent the explanatory power of education varies between the different countries. For each sample in our analysis, we have estimated (partial) eta-squared scores.⁴ The interpretation of eta-squared is similar to R-squared, as both describe the amount of explained variance.

For each sample, we estimated two models with SSS as dependent variable. The first only includes education, the second also includes income, age, and gender as control variables. The first one describes what one could call the “total” estimate of education. It reflects the absolute gap in SSS between the three educational groups. Model 1 is informed by the idea that the self-assessment of social status is essentially a classification process. When people classify, they rely on simple cues and categories. Seen from this perspective, it does not so much matter whether differences according to education are also differences *caused* by education. What matters is the extent to which different educational groups believe they have a different status position. At the same time, it is interesting to investigate how independent education is from other factors affecting SSS. In a second model we therefore control for income, age, and gender.

In figure 1, we have listed the total and partial mean eta-squared scores for education. For each country we estimated the mean eta-score, and the mean of the lower and upper bound of the confidence interval (CI). Hence, the reported coefficients do not refer directly to actual analyses, but summarize the analyses done for all samples. Though only a few samples showed non-significant coefficients, since confidence intervals of eta-squared score cannot be negative, these were taken as zero when calculating the mean lower-bound for the CI.

Figure 1 shows that education has a significant relationship with SSS across the board. Although some samples were non-significant, as mentioned, this was only the case for partial eta-squared scores. The mean total eta-squared score for education is 0.095—this means that education (without controls) explains, on average, 9.5 percent of the variance in SSS. This overall mean hides large differences between countries, as the mean etas range from 0.025 (New Zealand) to 0.272 (Cyprus). Though the total eta-squared scores in figure 1 do not show any non-significant samples, five out of 142 samples summarized in the figure were non-linear or showed a negative coefficient.⁵ For all other 137 samples, education is significantly and positively related to SSS, higher educated individuals

Figure 1. Average effect size of education on subjective social status per country (eta-squared).



have a higher SSS than middle educated individuals, and those who are middle educated have a higher status than those who are less educated.

A similar picture arises for the partial eta-scores—although the coefficients decrease when including income, age, and gender in the models. When including the additional variables, the mean coefficient is now 0.054, indicating that, on average, education explains 5.4 percent of the variance of SSS. As figure 1 shows, the decrease in effect size is not equal across the countries. The association of education with SSS, and the differences between the total and the partial scores of the individual samples, will be analyzed further in the third part of the results section. Of these underlying sample partial scores, seven are non-significant. Only one country has more than one non-significant coefficient (Croatia with two)—hence all mean scores remain significant. So, despite a small number of exceptions (though these may have arisen due to sampling variation), the numbers paint a clear picture: education is robustly, significantly, and

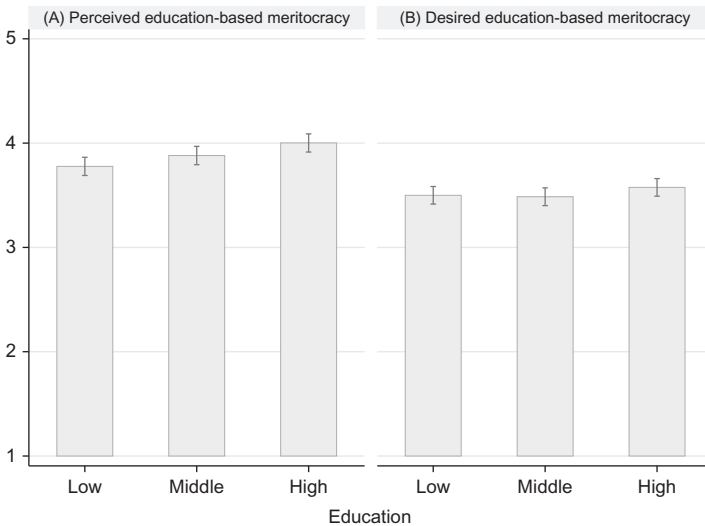
substantially related to SSS. The higher one's education, the higher one's SSS and this is the case in all countries in our sample.

The Legitimacy of Status Differences Between Educational Groups

So far we have only looked at how people perceive their own status in society. Regarding potential consequences of status differentials, it is important to assess to what extent these status differentials are perceived to be legitimate by the public at large. The 2009 ISSP wave (module Social Inequality) includes two items that pertain to education-based meritocracy (*perceived* education-based meritocracy and *desired* education-based meritocracy), which allows the legitimacy of education based status to be assessed. Two questions are relevant here. Firstly, what is the relative importance of education when compared to other characteristics that may determine success in life? Secondly, how much disagreement is there between educational groups concerning the *perceived* and *desired* importance of education in current societies?

Regarding the first question about the relative importance of education, we compared the average importance of education for getting ahead in society with the perceived importance of other factors asked in the same battery. After *hard work* (overall mean: 3.99) and *ambition* (3.96), *education* is seen as the most important factor for getting ahead (3.89). However, the first two merely describe character traits. Other factors more related to societal stratification, besides education, are all seen as much less important for getting ahead than education. Indeed, *wealthy family* (2.76), *race/ethnicity* (2.12), *gender* (2.10), *religion* (1.82) all score much lower than education. This shows that the character traits most strongly associated with meritocracy (Young 1958), hard work and ambition, are valued most highly. Those factors more related to structural stratification are all seen as less important, which in itself already reflects a certain belief in meritocracy. Indeed, what is noteworthy here is that education is considered almost as important as personal traits that are strongly linked to meritocracy. This hints at a (strong) connection between meritocracy and education. Regarding desired education-based meritocracy, the battery does not contain the items related to societal stratification; hence, such a comparison is not possible. However, the mean for desired education-based meritocracy is 3.52, well above the midpoint of the scale. This shows that in general the perceived importance of education is seen as relatively legitimate.

To test for possible disagreement between the meritocratic beliefs of educational groups, we ran multilevel analyses estimating the coefficients of education on perceived and desired education-based meritocracy items, with random intercepts for country and year. In figure 2, we display the average scores for the educational groups on these two items. The plot on the left for perceived education-based meritocracy, shows that the importance of education is not perceived equally between educational groups. The higher educated tend to emphasize the relevance of education for getting ahead in society more than the lower educated. This difference, however, is modest (0.23 on a five-point scale). On the other hand, the difference is larger than the difference between educational groups in *desired* education-based

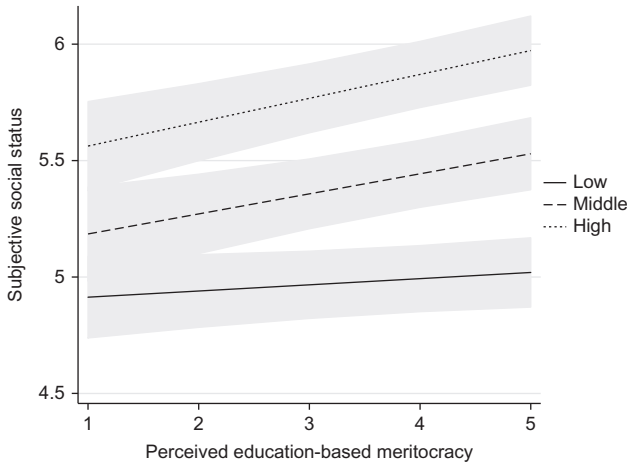
Figure 2. Education-based meritocracy beliefs among educational groups.

Note: error bars depict 95 percent confidence intervals.

meritocracy. Here the higher educated have a mean score of only 0.08 higher than lower educated (which is nevertheless statistically significant, $p < 0.001$). These results show that, although status differences exist and are perceived by citizens, they are by and large seen as legitimate, also by the less educated. While it is not surprising that the higher educated are more likely than the lower educated to stress the importance of education (as their status, in part, depends on its importance), it is not directly clear why this difference does not appear for desired education-based meritocracy. One possibility is that higher educated want to avoid being seen advocating a stronger importance of education in itself, because a direct importance of education for success in life violates the meritocratic idea that hard work and talent should be crucial rather than an educational category per se. Moreover, precisely the “educationalization of society” (Depaeppe and Smeysers 2008) implies that institutions do “the dirty work in reproducing privilege and disadvantage” (cf. DiMaggio 2012: 12) for the higher educated.

Contextual Analysis and the Variation Between Countries

The previous two sections focused on describing the current situation in the countries under investigation. In this third section, we look at (1) how the education relationship with SSS and education-based meritocracy relate to each other at the individual level and (2) how cross-national variation (see figure 1) can be explained. We first investigate the role of people’s ideas about the legitimacy of education, in the relationship between education and SSS. We have plotted the predicted social status of educational groups by the perceptions of education-based meritocracy (figure 3, see also table A2 in the appendix). Theoretically, it

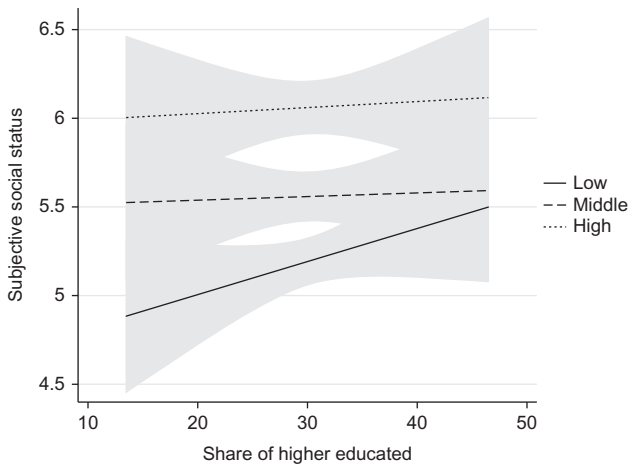
Figure 3. Perceived education-based meritocracy on subjective social status.

Note: shaded areas depict 95 percent confidence intervals.

seems plausible that those who perceive more education-based meritocracy should be more sensitive to the effects of education on status, and perceive the effect to be stronger. In that case, one expects the difference between educational groups in SSS to be larger among those who perceive more education-based meritocracy. As figure 3 shows, this is indeed the case. The difference between higher and lower educated for those who see education as not important at all is 0.64. This increases to 0.95 among those who see education as being essential to getting ahead. This increase is substantial and significant ($p < 0.010$). This means that among those individuals who perceive more education-based meritocracy in society, that is, they perceive education to be a more important or legitimate marker of status, subjective status differences between higher and lower educated people are larger.⁶

We also tested the interaction of education with *desired* education-based meritocracy. We expected to find that those who desired more education-based meritocracy would also be more sensitive to educational differences in subjective status. However, this was not the case. In assessing social status, people likely limit themselves to the current situation, and are not influenced by any desired state of affairs. In summary, *perceived education-based* meritocracy enhances the education-status relation, but *desired* education-based meritocracy does not.

The analysis of variation between countries starts with the finding from the eta-squared scores in the first section (figure 1). These made clear that the association between SSS and education differs between countries. Although all countries showed the same general pattern—i.e., higher education goes along with higher status—the strength of this relationship varies strongly. While many contextual factors may play a role in influencing this relationship, (both related and not related to education) we focus primarily on the centrality of higher education. We do this by looking at the share of higher educated individuals in the

Figure 4. Subjective social status by educational groups over share of higher educated.

Note: shaded areas depict 95 percent confidence intervals.

population. Figure 4 shows the mean SSS for the three educational groups, across different shares of higher educated (see also table A3 in the appendix). In this analysis, the association of education with SSS is moderated by share of higher educated. In countries with a small share of higher educated, the difference between higher and lower educated in SSS is 1.132, whereas in countries with a large share of higher educated, the difference falls to 0.624, a difference of -0.508 . Although the simple effects of the share of higher educated for the different educational groups turned out to be non-significant, the overall difference between the lower and higher educated decreases with an increasing share of higher educated ($p < 0.001$). This seems to be, primarily, the consequence of the higher SSS of lower educated in countries with a large share of higher educated. The middle educated do not show the same pattern as the lower educated. Hence, the association of education with SSS does not become merely weaker, but educational differences in SSS more strongly correspond with the distinction between having tertiary education or not. Where the relationship of education with SSS is mostly linear in countries with a small share of higher educated (all differences between the educational groups are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level), in countries with a large share of higher educated, the primary difference seems to be more discrete, namely whether or not one has a tertiary education that sets one apart from the rest of society.

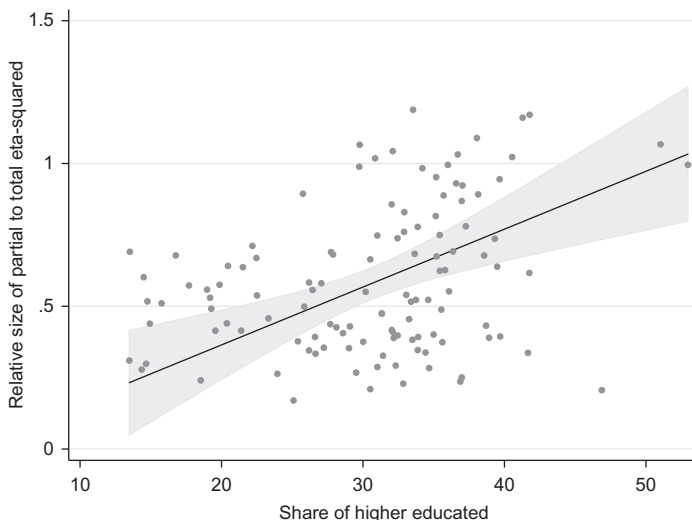
It is possible that rates of education-based meritocracy beliefs differ between countries, and that the interaction between share of higher educated and SSS is confounded by education-based meritocracy beliefs. However, testing this is only possible for the 2009 ISSP wave, as only this wave contains the items on education-based meritocracy. We ran additional analyses (not shown) on this wave that included all three factors in one model, and then compared these results with the results of these variables in separate models. These results showed that including all three factors (perceived education-based meritocracy, desired

education-based meritocracy, and share of higher educated) in one model did not produce coefficients meaningfully different from the coefficients of three separate models in the 2009 wave. Hence, these three factors seem not to be related to each other in their influence on SSS.

Our last analysis focuses on the eta-squared scores reported on in the first section. These eta-squared scores indicate the strength of the association of education with SSS. We reported on the total and partial etas that indicate, respectively, the uncontrolled and controlled (for income, age, and gender) coefficients of education (see figure 1). However, the extent to which the association of education with SSS is due to differences in income, age, and gender may depend on education's centrality in society. Therefore, we tested whether the relative size of the partial eta to the total eta is related to the share of higher educated in society. We calculated the relative size of the partial education eta-squared score to the total education eta-squared score per sample. In a multilevel model, controlling for the fact that the samples are clustered in countries, we tested whether there is a relationship between share of higher educated and the size of the relative eta (table A4 in the appendix). The share of higher educated has an estimate of 0.02 ($p < 0.001$). This translates to a 0.801 rise in relative eta-score, going from the lowest to the highest share of higher educated in our dataset. To illustrate this, we have plotted the relationship between relative eta and share of higher educated (figure 5).⁷ In sum, the relative role of education (relative to other variables) in predicting social status increases as the share of higher educated increases.

These results show that, in countries with a higher share of higher educated people, the association of education with SSS is smaller, but (1) corresponds more with the distinction between tertiary education or not and (2) is also more independent of at least income, age, and gender. Further research should

Figure 5. Relative size of partial to total eta-squared over share of higher educated.



Note: Dots refer to samples. Shaded areas depict the 95 percent confidence interval.

investigate whether this means that education has a more direct effect on SSS; or, whether it is still an indirect effect, but that it runs through different characteristics not measured here.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the relationship between education and subjective social status. Three key points were explored: the explanatory power of education for subjective social status, the legitimacy of the relationship between education and subjective social status, and its variation across countries. We demonstrated that, across 31 different countries, education is indeed positively associated with subjective social status. The higher their educational level, the higher people deem their social status to be. This relationship is not only consensually perceived, it is also considered relatively legitimate and uncontroversial: higher and lower educated people do not differ strongly in their mostly positive attitudes towards education as a basis for social inequality. In other words, beliefs supporting education-based meritocracy are widely shared. Additionally, we also found that amongst those who perceive more education-based meritocracy, educational differences in social status are larger. This indicates that people hold explicit, consistent views about this topic and that our results are not just an artifact of factors related to education. However, further research should investigate what exactly is the causal relationship. Two initial possibilities are: (1) that the relationship reflects different contexts where education is differentially salient, such that those who experience more of such situations are more affected by their educational level in their (subjective) social status, or alternatively, (2) that the relationship between perceived education-based meritocracy and subjective social status indicates a certain justifying ideology, where particularly higher educated individuals are in a position to justify taking a higher status position when probed on their subjective social status, regardless of actual educational salience.

Though we did not have appropriate data to test for causal relationships, this empirical work fills a gap between what both classic (Bourdieu 1984; Meyer 1977) and recent (Baker 2014) theoretical accounts of education have posited on the one hand, and the scant empirical support that was available to support those assertions on the other. According to these claims, education, beyond socializing individuals, affects society by classifying or allocating individuals to certain societal positions of more or less status (Bourdieu 1984; Meyer 1977). Moreover, it also affects society in a more general sense, constructing and reproducing a “culture of education” that affects, *inter alia*, ideas on what constitutes personal success and failure (Baker 2014). As such, education not only allocates individuals to positions, it does this *authoritatively*, and the resulting social hierarchy is deemed relatively legitimate. Our results indeed provide support for this allocation and its perceived legitimacy.

As for the characteristics of the relationship, we found that the strength, shape, and independence of the association between education and subjective social status differ depending on the centrality of education in society (operationalized as the proportion of higher educated people in society). In countries with

larger shares of higher educated, the association between education and subjective social status is weaker and, relatedly, this association primarily marks a difference between those with a higher education degree and those without. A higher education degree is a clear dividing line in societies with a greater proportion of higher educated people. As such, the way education marks status is less a gradual, and increasingly a binary divide. Moreover, the relationship between education and subjective social status also becomes more independent of income, age, and gender in societies with relatively more higher educated people.

These characteristics of the education-subjective social status relationship shed light on the role it plays in other status-related processes. The transition from a gradual to a binary educational divide is similar to how the reproduction of inequality shifts towards differentiation *within* the category of higher educated, such as college selectivity and horizontal stratification (Gerber and Cheung 2008; Torche 2011). This would reflect Brown's (2003: 160) notion of educational stagflation, where inflationary pressures on education persist while "the differentiating power of knowledge (credentials)" has declined. Differences in field of study for instance might reflect differences between social groups who depend differentially on education as their primary basis for social status, that is, those fields of study that lead to economically less or more rewarding professions. Further analyses of subjective social status would do well to include these categories in their analyses. Further, the growing independence of education from subjective social status reflects that education is essential for labor market success (Baker 2011; Hout and DiPrete 2006). Education is not of secondary importance, as something that follows existing structures of society, rather it is (increasingly) a central force in shaping these structures (Baker 2014). Education having an independent influence on subjective social status, and a potentially growing influence, mirrors this phenomenon.

While this research does not directly measure the extent to which individuals identify with their own educational level, it does show that education is an important source of status, and is likely to have an independent effect in this regard. Indeed, as demonstrated cross-sectionally in this article, it is likely that as education becomes more central in societies (e.g., through more people participating in an increasingly visible higher educational system), it becomes a more *independent* source of status. Further research should investigate how this is related to an (increasing) importance and awareness of educational labels and categories.

This awareness of educational categories and their associated traits and attributions is crucial for understanding the consequences of education *as an identity*. Now that we know that education is consensually seen as an important and legitimate source of social status, we can investigate education, not only as a cause for later personal socio-economic outcomes, but also as a source of identity (Spruyt and Kuppens 2015). For instance, to what extent do less educated people suffer the same psychological consequences as do other low-status groups who find themselves in a position of legitimately low status? When status appears or is experienced as merited, low-status people are less likely to act as a group and less likely to challenge existing inequality (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

By not challenging educational inequality, less educated people might also partly contribute to their own low-status position by processes of self-exclusion. As people base their expectations of others' competence on their rank in status hierarchies, lower educated individuals are likely to expect themselves to be of lower competence than higher educated individuals (Ridgeway 1991, 373–374; though see Spruyt and Kuppens 2014). This could be the case in the political arena where less educated people might think they lack the necessary skills, or are not the “right” people to contribute to political discussions.

There might be similar consequences in terms of lower self-esteem of the less educated. Due to the fact that a low education has often mostly negative connotations (i.e., a low status) it is unlikely to ameliorate low status issues. Previous empirical research on education-based identification has indeed consistently shown that less educated people are less likely to identify with their education(al group) when compared to higher educated (e.g., Kuppens et al. 2015; Stubager 2009). However, identification usually protects against negative self-esteem consequences of belonging to a low-status group (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey 1999). To the extent that the identification route is less available to less educated people, their self-esteem might thus suffer. Previous work has argued that the perceived legitimacy and the perceived mobility options might make it very difficult for the less educated to deal with the self-esteem consequences of their low status (Kuppens et al. 2015). Indeed, fatalism or feelings of futility is even more prevalent among those lower educated that feel they are being looked down on due to their lower education (Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck and Kavadias 2015; Van Houtte and Stevens 2008).

While the current research did not employ any longitudinal analyses, it is likely that the changing relationship between education and subjective social status is visible across cohorts (as older cohorts gained their educational level in times where a tertiary diploma was rarer) or different age groups (as education plays a different role across somebody's life course). However, additional analyses (not shown) did not reveal any such pattern. As such, it remains unclear to what extent the relationship of share of higher educated to the link between education and subjective social status is causal.

Scholars investigating the subjective social status-item in the ISSP datasets have noted that the status positions people assign themselves to tend to the middle of the distribution (Evans and Kelley 2004; Lindemann and Saar 2014). This is often interpreted according to reference group hypothesis, which holds that people compare themselves to people in their own social context (Ibid). However, this previous research also notes that people also take into account broader societal contexts, including comparisons with other countries (Evans and Kelley 2004; Irwin 2016). This means that although comparisons between societies on the basis of individually reported self-positioning on a social ladder are valid, differences are likely to be mitigated, since people primarily compare themselves with a reference group based on their direct social context. Seen from that point of view, the current investigation provides a conservative test of the underlying theories. Moreover, as Irwin (2016, 14) points out, individuals take “a moral positioning as well as a social one” where such a positioning is “partly

a moral claim, to do with injustice and a sense that things should be otherwise.” As such, it is likely that when a certain inequality is deemed more (less) legitimate, individuals might position themselves closer to (further away from) the middle. Further research should investigate how such moral claims relate to the educational system’s legitimacy as a system of stratification.

Overall, this paper demonstrates the importance of considering education as an important factor in the social stratification of status. However, the importance is not equal across countries. The strength of the influence of education on status differs not only absolutely, but also relative to other indicators such as income and gender. Thus, an apparent paradox seems to be that as education becomes more pervasive and widely shared, rather than leveling social differences, ironically it also becomes more distinctive and diagnostic in distinguishing people along group lines.

Notes

1. Though the sample consists of multiple years, the range is likely too short to perceive the long-term trends that underlie the relationships under investigation. Some surveys/samples were done after the initial release of the wave. In one case, fieldwork was started before the “waveyear” (Ireland 2006 was coded as 2005).
2. While preparing this paper we re-estimated our models based on respondents aged 25–75 to assess the potential impact of excluding the young (higher educated) students (results available upon request). Since this led to the same conclusions we present here the results based on the full sample.
3. Estonia, Lithuania, Spain (share of higher educated); and Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, France, Hungary, and the United States (income inequality).
4. Eta-squared score are calculated according to the following formula, where SS stands for sum of squares: $SS_{\text{factor}} / (SS_{\text{factor}} + SS_{\text{residual}})$. This is formally the formula for partial eta-squared, though for a *oneway anova* it is equivalent to the classical eta-squared (Richardson 2011).
5. Australia 2007, Bulgaria 2008, New Zealand 2007, Switzerland 2011, and United States 2006 where only Australia 2007 showed a negative relationship.
6. All three educational groups show a small positive relation between perceived education-based meritocracy and subjective social status, but this is only significant for the middle and higher educated ($p < 0.010$ and $p < 0.001$, respectively). This shows that the higher educated “profit” most, psychologically at least, from the perceived education-based meritocracy.
7. These analyses do not include the control variable income inequality. When including this variable, the coefficients changed significantly (the coefficient became weaker, but did not disappear). Further analyses showed that this was primarily due to the exclusion of 27 samples for which income inequality was not available, rather than the inclusion of income inequality (see table A4).

Appendix

Table A1. Contextual Variable Sources and Details

Indicator	Source	Details
Share of higher educated	OECD (2015)	% tertiary 25–64 year old; linear interpolation was used for Estonia, Lithuania, and Spain (21 values in total; only for four or less consecutive missing values)
GDP per capita	IMF (2016a)	Current international dollar
Government expenses	IMF (2016b)	% of GDP
Share in service sector	WorldBank (2017)	% of total employment
Income inequality	WorldBank (n.d.)	GINI index; linear interpolation was used for Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, France, Hungary, and the United States (22 values in total; only for four or less consecutive missing values)

Table A2. Multilevel Regressions on Subjective Social Status, Moderated by Education-Based Meritocracy Variables (Maximum Likelihood)

	Model 1 <i>Perceived education-based meritocracy</i>	Model 2 <i>Desired education-based meritocracy</i>
Constant	3.787*** (1.005)	3.678*** (1.009)
Gender	-0.123*** (0.020)	-0.128*** (0.021)
Income	0.479*** (0.011)	0.484*** (0.011)
Age	0.002*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
Education (ref. = low)		
Middle education	0.212 (0.123)	0.383*** (0.106)
High education	0.573*** (0.114)	0.844*** (0.096)
Education-based meritocracy variable	0.027 (0.019)	0.053** (0.019)
Education * education-based meritocracy variable (ref. = low)		

(Continued)

Table A2. continued

	Model 1 <i>Perceived education- based meritocracy</i>	Model 2 <i>Desired education- based meritocracy</i>
Middle education * education- based meritocracy variable	0.060 (0.031)	0.016 (0.030)
High education * education-based meritocracy variable	0.076** (0.029)	0.008 (0.027)
Share of higher educated	0.046** (0.015)	0.047** (0.016)
GDP per capita	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Government expenses	0.038* (0.016)	0.038* (0.017)
Share of employment in service sector	-0.053* (0.024)	-0.053* (0.024)
Income inequality	-0.005 (0.021)	-0.004 (0.021)
<i>Random effects</i>		
Country level intercept	0.109	0.110
Individual level variance	2.077	2.071
N (country)	23	23
N (individual)	20,310	20,181
-2LL	72,567.794	72,054.028

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3. Multilevel Regressions on Subjective Social Status, Moderated by Share of Higher Educated (Maximum Likelihood)

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	2.987*** (0.684)	3.077*** (0.854)
Gender	-0.093*** (0.008)	-0.095*** (0.010)
Income	0.402*** (0.004)	0.402*** (0.005)
Age	0.000	0.000

(Continued)

Table A3. continued

	Model 1	Model 2
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Education (ref. = low)		
Middle education	0.882*** (0.078)	0.864*** (0.091)
High education	1.305*** (0.124)	1.325*** (0.148)
Education * share of higher educated (ref. = low)		
Middle education * share of higher educated	-0.016*** (0.002)	-0.017*** (0.003)
High education * share of higher educated	-0.013*** (0.004)	-0.015** (0.005)
Share of higher educated	0.015 (0.010)	0.019 (0.012)
GDP per capita	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Government expenses	-0.003 (0.008)	0.003 (0.012)
Share of employment in service sector	0.005 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.020)
Income inequality		-0.005 (0.019)
<i>Random effects</i>		
Country level intercept	0.088	0.077
Middle education	0.026	0.027
High education	0.090	0.097
Year level intercept	0.075	0.086
Individual level variance	2.155	2.141
N (country)	27	27
N (year)	118	89
N (individual)	134,012	96,664
-2LL	484,067.380	348,558.162

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A4. Multilevel Regressions on Relative Partial Eta to Total Eta-squared (Maximum Likelihood)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	0.216 (0.116)	0.814* (0.342)	0.943** (0.360)	1.190** (0.405)
Share of higher educated	0.012*** (0.004)	0.020*** (0.005)	0.012* (0.006)	0.011 (0.006)
GDP per capita		0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Government expenses		0.011** (0.004)	0.009 (0.005)	0.005 (0.006)
Share of employment in service sector		-0.024** (0.008)	-0.022* (0.009)	-0.016 (0.010)
Income inequality				-0.011 (0.009)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Country level intercept	0.018	0.012	0.018	0.015
Year level variance	0.047	0.036	0.024	0.025
N (country)	27	27	27	27
N (year)	126	118	89	89
-2LL	-0.454	-33.810	-47.168	-48.470

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; model 3 includes only the 89 samples that have valid values on income inequality.

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