

# **Educational Experiences and Perceptions of Occupational Hierarchies:**

## **The Case of the Norwegian Working Class**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we present the experiences of members of the Norwegian working class in the educational system and show that the findings contradict established theories in the sociology of education in a way that calls for a re-examination of the function of societal hierarchies in such studies. Secondly, we report how working-class individuals comprehend society's valuation of their work and whether these experiences affect their own judgments and evaluations of work. The findings reveal an enlightened working class when it comes to conventional occupational hierarchies, but also show that members of the working class classify status in their own, distinctive way. The egalitarian cultural configuration we observe deviates in certain ways from what is reported in comparable studies for Britain, the United States (USA), and France. We argue that the key to the understanding of such variability is knowledge about how education is penetrated by social hierarchies in different social formations.

**Key words:** comparison, educational experiences, egalitarianism, Norway, occupational ranking, hierarchy, working class.

### **Introduction**

This article reports a study about how members of the working class experience the Norwegian educational system. A premise of many theories in the sociology of education is a mismatch between working-class culture and the school culture (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The stories told by these members of the working class about their school days do not disclose many signs of such a mismatch or conflicts caused by it. In interviews, they reveal their awareness of how society ranks occupations and what place workers are assigned in such (publicly acknowledged) hierarchies, but they criticise such (collective) representations, arguing for egalitarian values and for strengthening the social democratic order (and the Nordic model). Our study indicates that the societal embeddedness

of institutions such as education, work, and mobility, and in particular the hierarchical dimensions of such embeddedness, has a distinctly national character, which is affected by specific value systems and cultural structures. One key to the understanding of Norwegian society is the frequently noted existence of a pervasive (cultural) egalitarianism. Our hypothesis is that the uniqueness of Norwegian society consists not simply in the diffuseness of vertical, institutional structures, but also in the distinctive ways that egalitarian principles and rules of conduct affect the *modus operandi* of such institutions and how people experience them, as well as in the degrees of integration between cultural and societal domains.<sup>1</sup> Hypotheses of this kind are seldom explored in Norwegian social science, and one of the goals in the article is to demonstrate the necessity of such inquiries.

The paper comprises four sections. First, we consider some essentials in the sociology of education that touch on these topics, in particular the dimensions of hierarchy, class and the role assigned to the school in theories of social reproduction. Then we review briefly the historical context of class in Norway, noting that the working class has not been the object of systematic analysis in Norwegian social science. After presenting our methodology, we discuss the findings from our worker interviews, concerning participants' school experiences and their images of social ranking. We also use findings from our recent study about the middle class in Norway to help in the formulation of hypotheses about the working class. In the last section we use our results in a cross-national comparison, before presenting our conclusions.

### **Hierarchies and the social reproduction of education**

Across cyclical shifts,<sup>ii</sup> the idea of reproduction has been a common (and persistent) latent presupposition in most sociological studies of education. Here is an early assessment of this state of the art:

A review of the literature in sociology of education leads to one inescapable conclusion: *reproduce* is the master word, the cornerstone of theories that are otherwise thoroughly contradictory. From Parsons to P. Bourdieu, from B. Bernstein to S. Bowles, H. Gintis or M. Apple, education is above all reproduction. (...) These contradictory viewpoints (only the main ones have been mentioned here) are remarkable in that they are all based on a sort of paradigm - of central values, of dominant representations, of the system, etc. and this paradigm is accepted by the vast majority of sociologists (Petitat, 1987, p. 379-380)

In spite of the otherwise theoretical heterogeneity of the field, a shared presupposition was the structuring element of *social class*, even if the precise definition of this causal dimension sometimes was only implicit, justifying diagnoses like this:

Within the sociology of education, the spectre of the middle class exists as the *absent centre* of educational research. The middle class have traditionally occupied a position of assumed dominance in schools that neatly dovetails with the values of educational professionals. The resonance between middle-class values and school ethos has long been recognised by researchers exploring issues of social inequality. (Kehily and Pattman 2006, p. 38) (emphasis in the original).

Thus, in spite of its unifying status, the precise substance and effects of class dominance in schools are theorised in rather different ways in the sociology of education. For example, in Bourdieu and Passeron's widely cited classic, the mechanism of suppression is the symbolic power exerted through the teachers' pedagogical actions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In Basil Bernstein's theory, the working class is hampered in school due to cultural deprivation, through their linguistic reliance on the 'restricted speech code' (Bernstein, 1971), while in the ethnography of the Birmingham tradition, the working-class boy cultivates male, industrial labour power in a paradoxical form of counter-cultural dominance within the middle-class environment of a school (Willis, 1977).<sup>iii</sup> A common element in this vision is the existence of the class structure as a vertical, hierarchical context for the educational system, constituting a

systemic element that is the object of different theoretical interpretations as to how it affects life in schools. Another widespread tendency is that on the question of the ways the school affect adolescents, the voice of the young workers themselves has a feeble presence or a questionable validity<sup>iv</sup>, even if the tendency is still to present them “resistant, deviant and subversive” (Kehily & Pattman, 2006, p. 38).

Various forms of critique have been directed against these theories of reproduction. An early, and extended, case was the critique put forward by Margaret Archer in the 1980s, demonstrating the elements of ethnocentrism in such studies, in that e.g. Bourdieu and Bernstein, in their theories, tend to normalise essential traits of their own national educational systems. Instead, she documents the need for historical and comparative explanation of educational systems (Archer, 1983; 1989). In general, the message is that the interplay between broader, societal processes and the school as an institution has a complex nature; its central dimensions may well change historically and vary across social formations – in ways that reproduction theories mostly abstract from. In fact, this diagnosis is essentially mirrored by the retrospective reflections of one of the inventors of the reproduction idea: the label of 'reproduction' was only 'descriptive' and a 'shorthand' for the model of an actual 'meeting' between cultural and social domains in the specific, empirical case at hand (France) and was in no way meant as a theory of universal linkages:

The functionally stable character of this meeting really concerns the 'golden age' of the bourgeois education system (in France, the end of nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries) in other words the 'organic' period during which the bourgeois illusion of scholastic meritocracy was operating to full social and symbolic effect (Passeron, 1986, p. 621).

Still, in spite of this relativization, the study made a general, theoretical case:

The work's central idea is in fact that the most specific contribution made by the school to the reproduction of class differences is, first and foremost, an ideological

one. It consists in '*legitimizing*' the differences in rank in the social hierarchy that are produced through its egalitarian ideology and its apparently neutral criteria for selection ... (Passeron, 1986, p. 621) (emphasis added).

This interpretation emphasises the basic element of the class system: that societal hierarchy is a macro-system, and is embedded in the practices of the school. To uncover such linkages, we need to examine the emergence of interacting social systems, on several levels:

A sociological description of the school as a system of reproduction and self-reproduction, does not exclude but, on the contrary, calls for analysis of what lies outside the model, that is the history of education and the history of class relations (Passeron, 1986, p. 620).

However, the sub-discipline of the sociology of education has been hesitant to engage in such a program for cross-cultural analysis. To be sure, the comparative, and to some extent the historical dimension, is cultivated within other traditions of educational research, but the focus is then (typically) the content of schooling (variations in institutional forms, curriculum, pedagogy, classroom life, teaching practices, etc.), in scholarship where the idea of reproduction has a much less prominent position.<sup>v</sup> In a program for the comparative study of social reproduction and education the concept of a social class would have an obvious place. In more general terms, a common question would be how vertical structures and societal *hierarchies* in different social formations affect the institutions and practices of education. Such a problem would at the same time maintain the basic idea at the origin of the reproduction analysis, according to Passeron.

In general, the idea of educational mobility privileges the vertical aspect, and thus presupposes the existence of societal hierarchies. Moreover, most sociology assumes a basically individualist view of such processes. This explains the pervasive presence in the literature of the problem of the link between educational achievement and economic success -

a topic qualified to be part of a 'historical ontology' of dominant questions in the social sciences (Somers, 1996), and justifying the comment made by Kupfer in her review of the literature:

Surprisingly, few seem to question social mobility as such, and its dependence on social hierarchy ... In place of recommending social upward mobility, no one proposes the concept of reducing social hierarchies as a way to increase social equality or improve underprivileged people's living conditions. (Kupfer, 2015, p. 3)

### **The historical context: class formation and culture in Norway**

Workers as a class or as a collective have, until recently, been largely absent from Norwegian political discourse and as a topic for debate. Moreover, the indigenous working class has not been the object of systematic analysis in the social sciences of modern Norway, in spite of its (implicit) centrality in a country where the labour movement conventionally is portrayed as a main agent in the construction of the 'Nordic model' of tripartite cooperation in working life and industrial relations.<sup>vi</sup> Still, the richest 10% are rapidly increasing their wealth in western countries (Piketty, 2014), and this is also true in Norway, but for the majority it remains the case that the consequence of Norway's centralised salary negotiations has been a process of salary flattening, which over time has generated the most egalitarian salary distribution in the capitalist world (Barth et al. 2003, p. 19).

In addition, the extensive welfare system (providing free health and education) and the lack of an institutionalised and legitimate *bourgeois* high culture (Danielsen, 1998; Daloz, 2007; Skarpenes, 2007) have made Norwegian culture a loosely bounded one (see Lamont, 1992; 2000), in the sense that there is a distinct laxity in symbolic classification within the (traditional) cultural sphere. Thus, symbolic boundaries are blurred, resulting in a fuzzy image of the national culture. In a comparative perspective, this Norwegian cultural configuration is merged with other characteristics.

The middle class in Norway emerged in a nonfeudal, agrarian society, numerically dominated by peasants with a democratic constitution who were governed by a small stratum of civil servants (1814–1884). Norway had a weak bourgeoisie (i.e. a few large capitalists) but a lively economy of small enterprises which emerged during the nineteenth century, giving Norwegian modernisation a petit bourgeois, economic and sociocultural character, often summarised under the heading of ‘democratic capitalism’ (Sejersted, 1993). As for the lower strata, in the inter world war years Norway developed a strong working class with respect both to trade unionism and to political organisation, which brought social democracy to power in 1935 in an alliance with the farmers (in accordance with the Scandinavian interwar pattern).

Thus, the lower classes were certainly available during the establishment of the (upper) middle class in Norway to function as a negative point of identification. However, in contrast to the continental pattern, neither an aristocracy nor something akin to the German *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* was present in nineteenth century Norway. Thus, the class matrix of Norwegian modernisation in the nineteenth century had a peculiar asymmetry compared with the continental (and British) setting. It is hardly controversial to argue that the absence of ‘higher classes’ has contributed to the construction of an egalitarian Norwegian culture. In this social formation, moral repertoires are important for the highly educated Norwegian middle class and given the anti-hierarchical character of morality, this cultural structure matches well with Norwegian (or Nordic) egalitarianism (Sakslind and Skarpenes, 2014, p. 326).

Our hypothesis has been that the loose boundedness of the culture and the (comparatively) egalitarian distribution of wages will influence the views that members of the Norwegian working class hold about their status and hierarchies. We start by presenting and discussing the interviewees' views of their own education, before presenting how they experience society's valuation of their own work and whether these experiences affect their own judgments and evaluations of work and status. In this paper, we return to the study of consciousness based on interviewees' judgments about the division of labour in late modern society. Surveys in Britain where respondents were invited to rank occupations have been criticised for not being able to distinguish between the respondents' own views, and the views they thought they were supposed to provide (Savage, 2000, p. 27). To avoid such problems, and by engaging in conversation, we asked the interviewees both how they thought society would rank occupations and what their own rankings were.

### **Methodological Approach**

We conducted 56 semi-structured interviews. The target groups were manual workers in industry, or workers with routine or subordinated jobs in health and services. These employees match jobs where the average level of qualification requires no education beyond high school or vocational training to be used as a selection criterion. We covered six sectors of the workforce: industry, crafts, health (including kindergarten and after-school care), services (including hotel and restaurant, shop assistants, cleaning, cafeteria, and warehouse workers), oil, and transport. The interviews were carried out in three cities (Oslo, Bergen, and Kristiansand); but approximately half of the interviews were in Oslo (the capital). However, since the regional distribution of manufacturing in Norway includes a variety of industrial cultures in different local settings, we also included two other regional groups of workers, each representing cultures considered typical.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of sample according to sector*

	Industry	Crafts	Health	Service	Transport	Oil	Total
N	17	10	6	16	5	2	56

Sex: Male, 37; female, 19.

Place: Oslo, 27; Bergen, 14; Kristiansand, 4; and two different industrial cultures, 11

We followed up with gender questions and thus included both sexes in our study, as well as both public and private sectors. Our focus has been on the culture of the white majority of working-class citizens. As a social category performing functions important in the process of Norwegian economic modernisation, as well as being crucial to the politics of the welfare-state, this group is central to the exploration of socio-cultural continuity and change in the post-industrial age.

The 20th century brought a radical deindustrialisation of the labour force. Thus the historical “core” of the working class, those mainly employed in manufacturing, today constitutes less than 10% of the labour force. Still, estimates based on broader definitions of what comprises a wage worker, in all sectors of employment, indicate that the working class remains a significant social segment in Norway (a little less than 50%).<sup>vii</sup>

When selecting participants generating lists from the internet and the Yellow Pages directory. In addition, we used the snowball method, and each relevant trade union was consulted in the recruitment process. Thus, trade union members are slightly overrepresented in the sample. The youngest person interviewed in the sample was 22 years old, while the oldest person was 64. The average age was 43.9. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. The thematically ordered interviews focused on overall education and experiences in school, work,

ambitions, class, family, status, leisure time, politics, and cultural preferences. Our approach to the interviews followed Lamont's methodology (Lamont, 1992; 2000) of mapping "boundary work": We tried to bring up themes and situations we thought would evoke the contributors interest, giving them an opportunity to clearly articulate what they value and what they do not value; how they judge people, occupations, education, political parties, cultural artefacts, etc.; and how they rank, criticise, and legitimate. The interview guide was adjusted to the Norwegian context and supplemented with our own topics. A certain comparability was ensured by using guides overlapping the one used in our previous study of the middle class. Moreover, our effort to map the students school-experiences was based on the posing of some quite general and *open questions*<sup>viii</sup>, in a way that, basically, ensures comparability with the results from the Lamont's study of workers (Lamont, 1997; 2000). Even if this approach does not necessarily result in the precise identification of typical pedagogical practices in the school-system, or, eventually, their repressive functions as mirrored in sociological reproduction theory, we argue that our mapping of the working class' educational experiences indicates essentials in the nature of the relationship between social class and education in Norway.

Theoretically, our study is inspired both by Lamont's comparative sociology of valuation and evaluation (Lamont, 1992; 2000; 2012) and Boltanski and Thévenot's conceptual innovations (1983; 2006). Boltanski and Thévenot's approach demonstrates the different ways in which people justify their viewpoints by pointing out the collective benefits for society. Their method looks at these modes of justification and examines the type of appeal to a 'common good' characteristic of different "orders of worth" (*cités*). In an early paper from 1983, Boltanski and Thévenot studied (experimentally) how ordinary (French) people created classification systems or 'nomenclatures for (social) milieux' (Boltanski and Thévenot. 1983, p. 633). The participants sorted people (described on cards) into categories similar to the

classifications used in the national official statistics and in social science. The social structure as designed in the (French) official classification systems seems to be mirrored in people's mental maps. In one part of the interviews, we followed the experimental path presented by Boltanski and Thévenot. First, we asked the interviewees to rank occupations the way they thought would represent the general views in society (1). Afterwards, we asked them to present their own hierarchies and explain how they would rank occupations themselves (2).

### **Education and the Working Class**

In this section we present interviewees' stories about their time in school, and we discuss how these findings compare to the conventional wisdom of sociological theory. In brief, the school careers in our sample are as follows: 12 individuals completed programs at an upper secondary school allowing them access to universities and university colleges (three started and two have degrees from, respectively a university and a university college). Seven of these 12 later completed apprenticeship certificates. In addition, 35 of the others have an apprenticeship certificate. Five individuals have no education or certificate beyond their compulsory nine years in school (being 15-16 years old).

When asked to describe their experiences in school, most responses fell into four main groups (A-D):

**Table 2** *Categories of school experiences described*

	A	B	C	D	E
	Struggled at home and in school	Struggled academically, but got support at home and in school	Academically smart, but not interested in higher education	Mostly satisfied and happy with their years in school	Too diffuse to categorise
N = 56	7	8	6	30	5

In the first group (A, seven individuals), we find those who struggled in (and outside) school without receiving support. Two people explicitly told us of an upbringing with criminal and /or alcoholic parents, while three or four were bullied or struggled with dyslexia. One individual their family was economically poor during their childhood. Another group (B, eight individuals) contained people who struggled at school but were supported by their parents and teachers. These respondents typically struggled with concentration, dyslexia, and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Of course, school might have been difficult for them, but they had parents or teachers who supported them.

In a third group (C, six individuals), we found workers who were academically bright but, for various reasons, chose paths other than higher education. One girl dropped out of school because of her political views and one man reported a desire to do practical work. Another man in this group followed his dream of becoming an artist and ended up as a waiter, while a woman left school because of love. Coincidences led them to their current occupations. Still, none of them were particularly dissatisfied with how their working life had turned out. It is interesting that the *largest group* (D, 30 individuals) contained people expressing (some degree of) satisfaction with their years in school. Admittedly, some of them were quite tired of schoolwork, but despite finding school boring at times, they considered their school years as more or less a positive time in their life.

A: I think school was a lot of fun. And in the last year, when I was a senior, I was away from school a bit too much. (Chuckles) (...)

Q: And your relationship with the teachers from primary to upper secondary?

A: Awesome.

(Female, 40–50, employed as a canteen worker. Unskilled worker; she did not finish upper secondary school.)<sup>ix</sup>

A: I was very tired of school. (...) But I had a very good time in school. In upper secondary, I started with general courses [GCSE / A-levels]. (...) I did not want to go on [with higher education], so I changed track after a week [to chemical processing].

Q: Yes. And you haven't regretted this?

A: No. Not at all.

Q: How were your relations with the teachers?

A: No, they were very good.

(Male, 20–30, employed in a large private industrial company. Skilled worker, apprenticeship certificate in chemical processing.)

The majority of persons in category D had a good or reasonably good experience during their time in school. The people we interviewed moved into Norwegian working-class occupations in quite different ways. They have different experiences and backgrounds. Coincidences occur and affect life trajectories. One interviewee talks about growing up with many siblings and a single mother who demanded that her children earn their own money after finishing lower secondary school at the age of 15. Some started various vocational or general programmes but dropped out and got a job. In this category we heard stories of people who wanted to go into industry, enter craft professions, work with people, go sailing and follow in their parents' footsteps, while a couple of individuals told us they did not know a lot about alternative educations and occupations. Three went to university but missed the camaraderie of the workplace and left university. There is no trace in these narratives of the familiar sociological picture of an alienated class in which members of the working class struggle to cope with a strange (middle class) school culture.

Sociological theory has constructed many concepts, theoretical models, and figures of thought regarding patterns of class reproduction. An apparently universal point of departure in these analyses is the presumption of workers' alienation in school. These Norwegian experiences clearly diverge from this proposed pattern. There is no trace of opposition (countercultural or otherwise) to bourgeois culture (as for example in Willis, 1977's English case). Nor is there any trace of working-class pupils who (consciously or unconsciously) deny themselves what is already denied them (i.e. higher education), and thus live alienated lives in a collective pool

of unrealised intellectual talent, most with opportunities for social mobility ruined as a result of exposure to the symbolic violence of the teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). There are also few indications that this group fails in school because they are people with a 'restricted speech code' (Bernstein, 1971).

Perhaps, for some, their lack of higher education results from having few ambitions other than reproducing their parents' social position (Boudon, 1974). Even if such a theory might explain some of their experiences of school and occupational choices, none of them captures the predominant pattern in this material. It is simply not the case that the majority of this group considered school to be a bourgeois middle-class construction with a strange elaborated speech code. It is difficult to continue claiming that a process of symbolic violence dominates the institution when there are so few traces of this in working-class interpretations. School is not a culture in which they find themselves alienated; the majority had a good time at school.<sup>x</sup>

Both highly educated groups in Norway (Skarpenes and Sakslind, 2010) and groups with low education report very few personal crises when it comes to school and school success (in sharp contrast to the British case: Power et al., 2003; Reay, 2001; Ingram, 2008). Perhaps a clue to the socio-cultural character of many schools in Norway lies hidden under the apparent inconsistency of one of our interviewee's responses (Category D, above): "I was very tired of school. (...) But I had a very good time in school". One interpretation of this paradox is that some working-class pupils may dislike many aspects of the school environment (physical inactivity, the lack of 'fresh air' and access to the outdoors, its isolation from work and 'real life', its bookish modes of study, its lack of practical learning, the types of jobs it leads to, etc.), but still feel at home among their classmates and recognised by the teachers. To some extent this is a rather trivial point, congruent with the interpretation of the ethos of post-war

Norway's common school as 'the child-friendly school' by one of its historians (Telhaug, 1992)<sup>xi</sup>, as well as with results from surveys that show that a large majority of Norwegian adolescents report that they had a good time in school<sup>xii</sup>.

Nobody we interviewed regards higher education as a necessary condition for living a good life (although several are concerned about their children's education, some now regret they did not pursue a university education and some of the younger planned to finish upper secondary school and maybe go for a degree. Six participants reported that their parents were disappointed that they did not go further in the educational system, but mostly there was no pressure at all from their parents' generation. Only people in category A (and some in B) personally struggled in school; thus the majority's experiences in school were quite good. They have jobs with reasonable pay<sup>xiii</sup>, and they represent a generation which is proud of their work and still rather indifferent about the length of their education. When people compare themselves with others who have done better in competition for goods they value, feelings of inferiority or shame may occur (Sayer, 2005). However, educational achievements (or non-achievements) do not seem in this case to possess a sufficiently high common (cross-class) value to generate such feelings, or at least not in any significant way.

However, some impending changes can be identified. There are contributors who said that they felt a bit guilty because they had not managed their own children closely enough regarding school and homework. Three of the youngest interviewees were considering whether they should continue their own studies. We think an episode reported by a young woman (between 20 and 30) working in a supermarket illustrates attitudes towards authorities that are quite common among our respondents:

I had a doctor once, who did a report on me, and we talked, and I told her about the job I have today. I said I had to consider what to do next, but that I was happy right

now. She said she thought I should study further and take a higher educational degree. It would be a pity, she said, to waste all my intellectual resources by just sitting behind the checkout at a grocery store. Then I said: "Excuse me! No, no, no!" (Female, 20–30, employed as a grocery shop assistant. Unskilled worker, but studied part time to complete her A-levels.)

Sayer (2005, p. 954) argues that to 'be treated with contempt by others whose values one has no respect for might induce sadness and anger but it does not induce shame'. In this case, the young woman's pride and her encounter with this person seem to produce anger, even rage, but not shame. In the theoretical language of Bourdieuan sociology, this incident invites the following interpretation: The medical doctor performs an act of symbolic violence spontaneously (reflecting the *illusio* of elitist behaviour), and as orchestrated by her class position, but the force of its implied hierarchy is not 'misrecognised' and accepted, nor does it trigger submission, but is met with *resistance* by her young client, and in a rather forthright way. Perhaps the medical doctor represents an emerging, new hierarchy (or an older one - we don't know her age). However, she encounters a widespread, egalitarian imagery, solidly embedded in the working class, and in wide sectors of the Norwegian middle class. What kinds of hierarchies *do* workers acknowledge, then?

### **Occupational hierarchies**

How does the working class classify, rank, and value occupations? A few felt that the job they did was highly valued in society; for instance, the two electricians employed in the offshore oil industry regarded their job as being appreciated, as did three men working in a typical industrial area. They experienced their skilled work being highly valued where they lived. Eight mentioned that doing manual labour and craft occupations provided a fairly good income in Norway, therefore giving them a relatively high status in society. Quite a few

hesitated when they were asked to rank different occupations according to how they believed ‘society’ in general would rank them.

1. *Perceptions of the conventional view.* In the end, most interviewees presented quite common perceptions of an occupational hierarchy in Norwegian society. At the top level of society, they placed (and we quote from different interviews) physicians, lawyers, real-estate agents, stock brokers, money movers, economists, dentists, directors, managers, business leaders, IT professionals, researchers/academics’, while at the bottom of society, they placed ‘cleaners, garbage collectors, cashiers (at grocery stores), skilled and unskilled workers, elder-care workers, transport workers (i.e. bus or lorry drivers), cooks, female occupations (care), occupations in crafts and industry, sheet-metal workers, nursery staff, telemarketers’ along with immigrant workers:

I feel somehow that medical doctors and stuff have a high status, then. I suppose lawyers have a high status (...) I feel that people might look down on immigrant workers. But it’s often the immigrant workers who come who are craftsmen or bus drivers. (Male, 30–40, employed in public sector, working on the subway as an electrician. Skilled worker, apprenticeship certificate in electronics.)

According to these working-class participants, some of the classic professions still enjoy prestige (i.e. doctor or lawyer). Other professions have high prestige because of their high salaries (i.e. real estate agent) or the opportunity to exercise power (i.e. bosses).

The electrician quoted above feared wage reductions because many of the traditional labour occupations experienced social dumping following labour immigration. For instance, a woman in her 50s working in a health trade (i.e. licensed auxiliary nurse) expressed a feeling of frustration and resignation about a society that does not seem to appreciate care work:

A: Yes, if the occupation is not looked down upon directly, it is not worth as much as many other jobs. It’s “just” nursing assistant [or health-care workers]. (...) And the

working conditions and wages are not good. It's more profitable to be a real-estate agent than to take care of people (...)

Q: Does labour immigration influence your salaries and tariffs?

A: No, not really, we are dependent on labour immigration. We could not manage if they did not come in and take shifts in health-care institutions today, but it's clear that when you hear in the media about "take a Norwegian course for four hours and then start working in a nursing home for elderly", it says a bit about [the societal picture] of my job. (Female, 50–60, working in a nursing home. Skilled worker, apprenticeship certificate for health work.)

2. *The counter-images.* There are interviewees who simply would not rank occupations at all.

They felt that the practice of ranking is controversial. It is a 'problematic way to see the world', one said. 'It is wrong to accept the occupational hierarchy', others would argue.

About 20 mentioned that it was a pity when manual occupations lose prestige in society. It is not good for society that 'everyone needs a master's degree; this can lead to social dumping'.

Three compared ethnic Norwegians sitting in an office in a suit or uniform with other occupations employing mainly immigrant workers. Two mentioned that practical work is often negatively labelled as 'Polish work'. Both male artisans and industrial workers, female health and care workers, as well as both genders in various service and transportation occupations are, in our interviews, concerned about protecting their labour rights and wage conditions against what they see as a tendency towards social dumping.

There are examples of people who argue that, when it comes to ranking, one should almost turn the hierarchy upside down. The argument here is that the most important jobs are often poorly paid. A man (40-50, skilled worker) said "that those working in retirement homes with elderly people should always have higher status than the executive vice president of [aluminium and energy company] Hydro". Several participants discussed different occupational groups with each other and asked questions like the following (quotes from multiple interviews): 'If some business leaders were gone for seven months, no one would

really notice it, but if the bus drivers disappeared (...)', 'Who do we need the most: a plumber or a professor?', 'Someone must repair our watches; someone must clean.'

A recent British study shows that people are not at all naïve when it comes to their own location in the wider social structure, and the same study finds that people are critical and concerned about perceived inequalities and unfairness of this structure (Irwin, 2016, p. 14). We have similar findings. It is obvious that the working class is well informed of society's conventional ways of ranking occupations, and it is equally obvious that the working class' own rankings are different. Either working-class people do not accept the principle of ranking occupations at all, or they turn the hierarchy upside down, or they problematise the conventions.

In many ways, to judge from our interviews, the working class in Norway operates with a view of the division of labour that is similar to Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity: everyone is important for society to function. Indeed, several interviewees stressed that society would stop without plumbers, cleaners, drivers, artisans, factory workers, care workers, and their peers. Despite the conventional hierarchies, and despite the fact that many working-class trades seem to be losing prestige via comparison with occupations requiring university degrees, our interviewees more often than not expressed pride in their work. However, societal ranking makes them angry, frustrated, sad, and melancholic. Five working in the health sector and in services (i.e. sales, cleaning, and hotel and restaurants) had experienced derogatory comments, for instance:

The worst comment I have ever received at work made me feel small. There was one woman who came out [from an office] and said: "Lucky you to have a job in which

you do not need to think”. (Female, 40–50, cleaning operator in a university. Skilled worker, apprenticeship certificate in cleaning operations.)

Our data about education and occupation do not give us many indications of an angry white male working class, but we can observe a tendency (five women in our sample) towards the creation of a frustrated and sad white female working class. In general, the majority of our working class contributors have not had any trouble ‘finding their way in a social space’. They can reproduce society’s classifications, but refuse to accept the hierarchies associated with them. Mostly, the interviewees are quite satisfied with their jobs or at least do not appear unsatisfied (although there are exceptions, like some of the women).

When it comes to hierarchy, the findings reported above show that our interviewees have clear ideas of how they believe society ranks occupations. These views coincide with conventional ways of ranking. Several, especially women in health and service occupations, rank themselves low on what they perceive as society’s occupational hierarchy. Still, the majority consistently expressed ‘working-class pride’. *If there is something collectively shared among the workers, it is that they mostly do not turn the problematic aspects of occupational rankings into personal problems.* Instead, institutions and politics are to be blamed. The most common arguments and critiques made by the interviewees include:

- economic and industrial policies has failed (jobs are leaving Norway for low-cost countries)
- educational reforms over the past 20 years have introduced too much abstract theoretical knowledge into the curriculum and failed to include vocational skills for students (especially boys)
- labour policy influenced by the European Union’s (EU) demand for free movement has opened the doors for social dumping in some sectors

- the Norwegian model's much celebrated tripartite cooperation (state, trade unions, and employers' federation) has not been successful when it comes to wages policy in care work occupations, in which women are heavily overrepresented.

Obviously, working-class people want their occupations to be more appreciated, and to receive pay according to their real importance in a society. When challenging the status hierarchy, their critiques and justifications may be expressed with frustration, anger, despair, sarcasm, melancholy, or resignation. Still, they link their justifications to collectively accepted arguments (such as labour policy, curriculum reforms, gender policy, social dumping, etc.) – nearly always trying to make their situational judgment general, and oriented towards the need for social and economic change (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

### **Comparison**

Our portrait of the societal values and visions in the Norwegian working class diverges in specific ways from the pictures drawn of comparable class-cultures in other western nations, and the patterns observed concern varieties in the nexus between social hierarchies and education. Michele Lamont's conclusions on her two cases (Lamont, 1997, p. 206ff; Lamont, 2000) delineates clearly the emotional essence of this relationship, as internalized socio-cultural structures: "Both French and American workers greatly emphasize intelligence, knowledge, and education when discussing their feelings of superiority and inferiority" (Lamont, 1997, p. 206). But the character of this linkage, and its structural foundation, varies between the countries, and reflects differences in their cultures of education, as well as in the workers perception of the nature of the social hierarchy, in particular its degree of openness to (upward) mobility.

To American workers, the boundary between their world and the world of educated people appears to be more permeable. Even more, Lamont's picture of the white American working class is that of a class obsessed with social mobility – they always look upwards – reflecting the so-called American Dream (Lamont, 2000). They value ambitions, success, and money very highly. As a class, they see the opportunities, and this class considers American society to be open: it is possible to do anything. Such visions reflect institutional differences in the educational system, along the axis from “democratic” to “elitist” structures: Several American workers (still) aspires to obtain a college degree, while in sharp contrast, the French white working class considers itself trapped as a result of a meritocratic educational system. The white French working class criticises the "bourgeois", "bosses" and "higher-ups" (Lamont, 2000, p. 221). According to Lamont (2000, p. 220), this class also feels inferior regarding educational and cultural knowledge.

While workers in both countries value formal education, they frequently report negative experiences with the school. Most emphasize that their parents did not encourage them as students, and many even mentions being put down by their parents, discouraging career ambitions. Such resentment appears as more culturally embedded in France, where many parents simply don't believe in class mobility and resent their children's movement into white-collar jobs, while in the USA, barriers to social mobility tend to be explained in terms of economic resources or practical circumstances.

The feeling of inferiority is also present in British class studies, in the sense that shame and a desire to appear *respectable* are common in the working class (especially among women:

Skeggs, 1997). A widespread 'dis-identification' with class belonging, and claims of being ordinary by the majority of the working class, are interpreted by Savage and his colleagues as a defensive device to avoid the politics of being labelled in class terms (Savage et al., 2001).

The overall findings from the Norwegian case differ from Lamont's, Savage et al.'s, and Skeggs' findings from the USA, France, and Britain. The Norwegian working class does not strive for social mobility as is the case in the USA; nor does it criticise the education system for giving them a hard time, for reproducing class positions, and for its cultural repression as in the French case. Finally, even if we might catch a glimpse of the demonization of the working class in media discourse, it still does not appear to affect the class' view of themselves as workers. The impressions of anxiety around not being respected (Skeggs, 1997) and of attempts to avoid collective labels (Savage et al., 2001) do not easily fit the Norwegian working class.

Sayer argues that class inequalities mean that the "social basis of respect" in terms of access to valued ways of living is unequally distributed, and that when there is a cross-class agreement about how ways to live are valued, class-related shame and concern about respectability can occur Sayer (2005, p. 955). This specific conjunction of social inequality and shared values mirrors the image of a *'tightly-bounded culture'* that Lamont uses to describe France and how it differs from the *'loose-boundedness' of culture* in the USA (Lamont, 1992, p. 114-120).

However, in the French case, the effects of this structure are modified by certain peculiarities of the socio-political history of the French working class. As Sayer notes, the working men

studied by Lamont (2000) were less likely to feel shame than their USA counterparts because they had a more structural and politicised understanding of class (Sayer, 2005, p. 956), something which implies that the French working class has a certain collective protection against the dominant culture. Still, the tight-boundedness of Sayer's imagery may explain the shame observed in the English working class, in particular since, as Sayer suggests, this type of response to inequality is likely to be strongest in societies or cultures where members have individualistic explanations of inequalities (Sayer, 2005, p. 955). A significant element in enforcing this individualism is the persistence of meritocracy in the educational system.

The elements of an explanation to the Norwegian lack of shame are thus as follows: by comparison with Britain, standards of living are more equally distributed. The culture of the Norwegian working class is more collectivistic and egalitarian than its British counterpart. In addition, the democratic and child-centred common school in Norway lacks the meritocratic culture that seems necessary to impose, and to supply the ideology needed to legitimate, the hierarchies of knowledge and power described in much Western sociology of education.

There are, of course, deviations from this picture. To mention just a few: increasing inequalities are emerging in Norway, especially noticeable in the contrast between east and west Oslo – a fact many of the interviewees themselves mentioned. Plus one group of women in health care and services is – if not shameful and servile – angry, exasperated, and even sad. The habitus of this group seems to have changed when compared to the same cohort during an earlier investigation: in her study of working-class women in the 70s and early 80s in Norway, Marit Hoel (1983) showed the collective pride among women entering paid work during those years. They were managing their own job and their own money. This generation of women primarily entered service and health occupations. Many of these occupations were

newly established in the occupational structure in the welfare state, and several of them also resembled the servant professions that existed before the housewife era (approximately 1940–1980) in Norwegian history: that is, maids in private homes, servants, and farm girls and boys. In the welfare state, some of these tasks became part of the occupational structure, albeit in far more settled conditions, but at the same time, the work is still poorly paid and “servant-like” (i.e. cleaning, cooking, serving food, and working as a cashier). Where Hoel mainly identified pride in her study of women from the 1980s, we can register, in addition to pride, a certain resignation and anger among some of these women, as a response to their placement at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

Our worker participants’ identity and social perception emerges from an egalitarian culture where imageries of education are only weakly linked to hierarchies of knowledge and power. Even if the proportion of teachers in the Norwegian education system with an upper-middle class background does increase somewhat as a student moves from kindergarten to the university level, indicating at least a latent hierarchy, nevertheless the overall teaching body has a rather ‘popular’ profile, where the lower strata are well represented (Hjellbrekke and Korsnes, 2012, p. 120). In combination with a democratic and ‘child-centred’ culture, this fact most likely explains much of the pronounced lack of dissatisfaction with school found in our sample of workers. Such facts indicate the existence of a rather weak interaction between hierarchies of power, knowledge and education in Norway.

Even more, the egalitarian culture makes available, and appealing, certain ways of critiquing inequality. Thus, if hierarchies emerge or tend to stabilise, there is a collectively shared view

that policy needs to change. With some exceptions, our data point to the existence of a certain collective confidence – or even a political confidence – still present in the Norwegian working class. The working class does not strive for upward mobility; it wants to be what it is; it wants society to continue appreciating it for being just that, symbolically as well as in material terms (wages); and it wants a strengthening of the egalitarian culture of valuation and justification.

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<sup>i</sup> In Norway, sociological research in the tradition of mobility studies demonstrates coherence between social background and educational achievements (Hansen, 1999; Hjellbrekke and Korsnes, 2012). Several studies of the Norwegian society have shown self-recruitment (social closure) to law and medicine (Nordlie Hansen, 1999; Nordlie Hansen & Strømme, 2014). Some models also show trends towards intergenerational reproduction in the categories of upper-level services and unskilled, manual occupations (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012: 103-104). Indeed, these findings indicate that a process of social reproduction is going on. At the same time for people in high-status professions, it has been shown that "two-thirds had fathers with modest occupational positions" (Elstad, 2002: 32), suggesting a fair chance of upward mobility. In addition, values such as equality, solidarity, honesty and democracy are important in the Norwegian culture, and they might explain the comparatively diffuse content of notions like 'social status' and 'hierarchy' (Skarpenes and Sakslind, 2010). Thus, it is interesting to know how lower educated people in an egalitarian society experience their time in school and their position in the occupational structure. See note X.

<sup>ii</sup> The topic is, for example, welcomed back on the agenda, after having had a shifting presence, in the extended review of the book edited by Lois Weis (Weis, 2008) by Ken Roberts (Roberts, 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Such variations are documented in periodising "the main stages in the construction of educational inequality as a social problem" in the English case. Barriers against working-class access to schooling are in the early phase identified as *financial*, then as *cultural*, before the emphasis is on school *organisation* and, lastly, in reproduction theory, the focus is on the school itself as *a system imposing the dominant culture*. (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996, p.19).

<sup>iv</sup> The perhaps most explicit example of "voice" is in Willis (1977), but his *lads* were from the low-stream students, and constituted a sub-group in the worker-population. For a discussion of the representativeness of this case, see Foster et.al., 1996, p. 129ff.

<sup>v</sup> For a study of national contrasts indicating the particularities of a Nordic case (Denmark), see Osborn (2001). She writes: "The English education system has grown out of a *laissez-faire*, liberal tradition which has been associated with voluntarism, local autonomy and differentiated provision. Education in France has been organised according to the republican ideal, which sees the state as having a duty to ensure a universal system, providing equal opportunities for all. Denmark, along with other Nordic countries, has a strong tradition of communitarianism which places less emphasis on professional autonomy and relies more on a powerful folk tradition of local democracy and social partnership. These different national cultural traditions are reflected in the different emphasis placed on 'affective' and 'cognitive' concerns within each education system" (Osborn, 2001, p. 270). See Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010, p. 277-278) for a summary of the major differences between the Norwegian and British educational systems.

<sup>vi</sup> This finding is a striking fact of intellectual history, especially in comparison with the case of Britain, where sociologists (and intellectuals in general) are portrayed as obsessed with the topic of class, in particular the working class. Even more, much of the identity of the discipline of sociology in Britain is founded on the tradition of working-class studies (Savage, 2000).

<sup>vii</sup> In 2015 Statistics Norway reports employments by occupation thus: managers 7.7 %, occupations requiring academic credentials (professions etc.) 26.8 %, occupations requiring university college credentials (nurses, social workers, kindergarten and primary school teachers etc.) 17%. In all 51.5 % of those employed had higher education. The rest (office occupations 5.9 %, sales and service 19.9 %, farmers and fishermen 1.9 %, craft 9.3 %, industry 6.2 % and other occupations 5.3 %) add up to 48.5%. Retrieved 25 November 2016, from <https://www.ssb.no/264147/sysselsatte-15-74-ar-etter-kjonn-og-yrke.arsgjennomsnitt.prosent>.

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<sup>viii</sup> Here are some of our main questions posed, in rather approximate English translations: When you left lower secondary, what did you think about the education you were given? How did you experience your school-days? Do you think the school works well? What in school did work well for you? What did not work well? What were your teacher relationships?

<sup>ix</sup> Q: Question. A: Answer.

<sup>x</sup> Needless to say, this conclusion concerns the role of the school, as observed in our comparatively framed interpretation that whatever the function of education in Norway is, it is hardly of the (repressive) types described in the classical works of the sociology of education. Of course, other forms may exist: The culture of Norwegian education is, evidently, in structural terms, a culture of the middle class, in its Norwegian forms. But how this culture is institutionalised and in action in class-rooms is largely unknown terrain, since Norwegian sociologists, even when doing 'sociology of education', maps the influence of just about everything but the school-culture itself (a recent example is Heggen, Helland and Lauglo, 2013). Nonetheless, a form of 'social reproduction' is going on, since a large majority of our interviewees 'reproduce' the status of their family of origin.

<sup>xi</sup> A methodological argument against our interpretation would perhaps be that our worker-contributors tend to understate or gloss over negative experiences in school, for cultural reasons. However, it is hard to find circumstantial evidence to validate such practices, as something widespread, in egalitarian Norway.

<sup>xii</sup> The recent report from a large-scale survey of attitudes among young Norwegians concludes this way: "National studies of the last 20 years show that Norwegian lower secondary students show an increasing level of satisfaction and fewer report boredom or dread going to school. Compared to pupils in many other countries, the level of satisfaction in Norwegian education is high" (Bakken, 2016, p.24). The current study reports that more than 90% of all secondary level students agree (completely or partly) with the statement "I am satisfied with school" (*Jeg trives på skolen*) (Bakken, 2016).

<sup>xiii</sup> Some earn only 270,000 Norwegian kroner annually, but some working in the oil industry make up to 1,000,000 Norwegian kroner. In general, male workers in industry and in craft occupations make good money, and women in health and service don't.