Who Gives Credence to Whom?: Exploring Status and Relational Equality with Empirical Tests

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Forthcoming, *Journal of Politics*

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**Abstract**: A prominent view of equality that has arisen in recent years – social or relational equality – argues that whatever the distribution of quantifiable resources in a society, citizens must *treat* each other as equals: if some citizens are ignored because they are seen as low-status, it is a problem that should be rectified. However, the meaning of relational equality is vague. As an exercise in "middle-range" theorizing, we operationalize several conjectures that are compatible with relational equality, and submit these to empirical tests. In particular, we examine whether high-status people give little credence to the political views of low-status individuals. We find that some citizens' political views are indeed given less credence, but that this pattern occurs not because of their status *per se*, but rather because of how they communicate their arguments. Our findings help to clarify what aspects of relational equality represent the most promising avenues for further inquiry.

**Keywords:** relational equality, social equality, listening, status, political psychology

**Supplemental Materials Statement:** An appendix with supplementary materials and analysis is available online at [URL]

**Replication Statement**: Files to reproduce the quantitative results reported herein are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop).

**Statement concerning human subjects**: The studies reported herein were conducted in compliance with relevant laws and were approved or deemed exempt by the appropriate institutional and/or national research ethics committee.

"Rich people just care less," declared the headline of an opinion piece in the *New York Times*. The wealthy, the author declared, pay little attention to those without power and money: "those with the most power in society seem to pay particularly little attention to those with the least power" (Goleman 2013).[1] This worry, that those of higher status (those with more power and wealth) will "pay less attention to those a rung or two down," is a worry for democratic citizenship. If high-status citizens ignore others, then there is reason to be concerned about how we relate to one another as citizens. And if income inequality is increasing, then the concern is all the greater.

The worry about the wealthy and the powerful ignoring those with less status is not just a concern of opinion writers; it has animated a prominent view of equality that has arisen in recent years. Social or relational egalitarians[2] argue that whatever the distribution of quantifiable resources in a society (e.g. money), citizens must *see and treat each other* as equals. Social equality is now one of the most prominent conceptions of equality, having "gained significant traction amongst political theorists" (Schuppert, 2015). It is probably now luck egalitarianism's most important rival: "Two views of social justice have been engaging philosophers' attention and sympathy over the past decades: luck egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism" (Gheaus, 2016).

The innovation of relational equality is that it demotes distribution of income to a secondary factor when we conceptualize equality. If high-status citizens look down upon those with less status, dismissing their views as unimportant simply because of who is offering them, it arguably means that democracy is failing the standards of relational equality. Income and wealth are still relevant in this setup, but in a more instrumental way: the

[1] The author cites the work of Dacher Keltner and Michael W. Kraus (though not any particular article by either one). See (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Kraus et al. 2012).
[2] We use the terms interchangeably.

distribution of resources is a matter of concern *insofar as* it undermines relational equality—a relationship relational egalitarians regularly assume.

Relational equality has many dimensions. Here we focus on one in particular: that high-status Americans give lesser credence to the political views of low-status Americans—that they are less likely to take their arguments seriously and consider them carefully. By adopting this focus we extend the idea of relational equality in ways that its advocates suggest. This is an exercise in what Merton (1957) calls "middle-range" theorizing, whereby the broad and sometimes vague conjectures that are characteristic of normative theory are distilled into a narrower, but more tractable, set of testable hypotheses (Mutz 2008; Mutz 2002; Neblo et al. 2010, for excellent discussions).

Submitting an abstract idea to empirical scrutiny necessitates honing in on particular aspects of the idea. While this comes with a cost—we must defer examining some aspects of relational equality to future work—this exercise is particularly fruitful since relational equality, heretofore, has never been tested empirically. Although the concept has existed for at least twenty years, even its proponents acknowledge aspects that are vague. Operationalizing key parts of the theory for testing help to develop structural (rather than individualistic) aspects of the theory. It also leads us to consider in what contexts relational equality presents an important problem for democratic citizenship. And it leads us to elucidate the overlap between relational equality and epistemic (especially testimonial) injustice, which is concerned when members of some social groups are not believed. Epistemic injustice is conceptually distinct from relational equality, but as we note below the concerns of each bear a strong family resemblance.

We are hardly the first to examine the political role of social status, but our research differs from previous studies of status in two important ways. First, while many studies show that high-status people listen to those with lower status less than to others, these studies all examine face-to-face to interaction. Face-to-face interactions are, in a way, peculiar. They are small, particular, and episodic. Moreover, low- and high-status people rarely communicate face-to-face about politics, which might limit the structural significance of face-to-face interactions. In contrast, we designed a set of studies that focused on communication that unfolds through political media. In this, we are pushing the idea in a new direction in order to think of it in *structural* terms, a necessary step if the idea is to fulfill its advocates' aspirations to become a theory of justice.

Second, we carry out a research design suited to examine behavior of the wealthy. While status takes on many forms, our interest is if high-status citizens, defined by income and occupation, pay attention to low-status citizens. By accruing a critical mass of wealthy citizens to study, we engineer a rare opportunity to investigate how this particular group views their fellow citizens. In this, we take seriously an admonition from Elizabeth Anderson that "political philosophers need to become sociologically more sophisticated. Because the object of egalitarian concern consists of systems of social relations, we need to understand how these systems work to have any hope of arriving at normatively adequate ideas" (Anderson 2012b, 55; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018, 156).

We find scant evidence that citizens automatically dismiss political views offered by low-status individuals—the abiding concern of social egalitarians. This result holds even among high-status individuals. At the same time, our results illustrate how low-status individuals could nonetheless come to be ignored—not because of status *per se*, but as a byproduct of presenting their political views less adeptly than others. Our results help clarify the mechanisms that link status to giving credence to others on political matters, and point to different remedies than those that social egalitarians typically advance. Still, our studies suggest that the underlying concern of social egalitarians—that some citizens are apt to be ignored—is correct.

***What is Social Equality?***

For a long time, theories of justice focused on the distribution of resources. John Rawls, for example, discusses the circumstances that justify material inequality among people, while retaining the idea that all people are fundamentally equal. More recently, scholars shifted the emphasis from what people have to how they obtain it. "Luck egalitarians," for example, argue justice and equality mean that society should compensate for bad "brute" luck, but once this compensation is given, and if society establishes fair procedures, then the resulting distribution of income is fair. Different choices will usually lead to different income outcomes; but as long as people are treated equally, their autonomy respected, and there is compensation for bad brute luck, this outcome is fair according to luck egalitarians.[3]

Relational egalitarians disagree with luck egalitarians (and other arguments that focus on distribution of income as a metric of equality) because, they argue, a "fair" distribution of wealth and income is unjust if it undermines equal status. Samuel Scheffler argues: "Equality, as it is more commonly understood, is not, in the first instance, a distributive ideal… It is, instead, a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another" (Scheffler, 2005, 21). Elizabeth Anderson argues that "Relational egalitarians identify justice with a virtue of agents (including institutions). It is a disposition to treat individuals in accordance with principles that express, embody, and sustain relations of social equality

[3] The luck egalitarian literature is quite extensive. An overview is (Arneson, 2011); a nuanced defense is (Tan, 2012) Some social egalitarians like Elizabeth Anderson contrast their arguments directly with luck egalitarianism, while others contrast it with distributive theories of justice in general.

(Anderson 2010, 2) Relational egalitarians emphasize the importance of *status*. Irrespective of how income or other differences arise, if a person is treated as less than equal—if she is denied dignity or if her political concerns are dismissed out of hand, for instance—it represents an injustice.

The way that social egalitarians sometimes explain their argument, however, leaves some questions unresolved. Anderson says that social egalitarian arguments roundly reject "such hierarchies based on circumstances of birth, such as caste, race, family lineage, and gender" (Anderson, 2008b, 264; see also Anderson, 2008a, 145; Fourie, 2015, 3). Yet since liberals of all kinds oppose discrimination or favoritism based on unchosen characteristics, this rejection does little to develop social equality as a distinct concept. That social egalitarians often discuss what implications their views have for income inequality (Schemmel 2011) also does not help clarify the distinction between distributive justice and relational equality. Twenty years after David Miller provided a first draft of social equality, supporters of the idea lament that social egalitarians' "proper positive aim [is] not often clear" (Garrau and Laborde, 2015, 47). In his comprehensive comparison of luck and social egalitarianism, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen argues that relational egalitarians have not answered a basic question: "what is it to relate as equals in the first place"(Lippert-Rasmussen 2018, 63).

One place where social equality, particularly as developed by its two most prominent defenders, Anderson and Scheffler, has potential to distinguish itself from previous conceptions of equality is its focus on credence—that is, taking the arguments of others seriously. Anderson says that as citizens: "We enjoy standing to make claims on everyone else, that they pay due attention to our interests. We make such claims in our own right, not on account of our position in the division of labor or rank in any hierarchy of esteem or power. We make our claims meeting one another eye-to-eye, not having to beg for consideration, nor acting as if, in recognizing others' claims, we are doing so as a condescending favor" (Anderson, 2008b, 264-5). Scheffler similarly discusses an "egalitarian deliberative constraint": "In a relationship that is conducted on a footing of equality, each person accepts that the other person's equally important interests—understood broadly to include a person's needs, values, and preferences—should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of the relationship" (Scheffler 2015, 25). If people of high-status do not listen to those of lower status on political matters, then social inequality undermines political equality.[4] This is a significant claim, and one that can serve to distinguish relational equality from distributive equality if true.

Yet examples from both Anderson and Scheffler appear at first blush to suggest their focus is on individual interactions; Anderson's discusses individuals talking "eye to eye," while Scheffler illustrates the egalitarian deliberative constraint with a family discussing where they should vacation. This focus seems similar to one strand of the idea of epistemic justice, testimonial injustice, which is when one person's prejudice against a social group leads her or him to discount the voice of a member of that group (Fricker 2007). An example is a "case of 'stop and search' by the police, where a racial prejudice affects the perception of the police officer so that a young black male driver receives a prejudicially deflated level of credibility when he declares that he is the rightful owner of the car" (Fricker 2013, 1319).

[4] David Miller seems sympathetic to this claim, too: "Unless we enjoy equal status as citizens, we cannot have equal status in social life more generally" (Miller 1997, 234-5). Remarkably, Miller sees this relationship as all but self-evident: "This is an empirical claim for which I cannot provide evidence, but it may seem so obvious as not to need any" (1997, 234-5).

Despite this surface similarity, relational egalitarians are not only thinking of individual encounters. This is vividly clear since Anderson, in her sympathetic critique of Fricker, argues that "structural injustices require structural remedies" (Anderson 2012a, 171). Indeed, social egalitarians do not present their ideas as a *supplement* to luck egalitarianism (such as by saying luck egalitarianism is about structures and relational egalitarianism is about individual attitudes). Instead, relational egalitarianism is presented as an *alternative* theory of justice to luck egalitarianism (Anderson 2010, 2; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018), which is concerned "with the implications of equality on a political and institutional level" (Fourie, Schuppert, and Walliman-Helmer 2015, 4). Toward the end of her seminal article on relational egalitarianism, Anderson says: "This gives us a rough conception of equality. How do we derive principles of justice from it" (Anderson 1999, 313); see also (Anderson 2010, 2; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018, 138)? Unsurprisingly, toward the end of his essay explaining the "egalitarian deliberative constraint," Scheffler says that the question is how to scale up the constraint in a "society of equals" since the issue is how we think about "the institutions and practices that constitute the social framework" (Scheffler 2015, 38).

Nonetheless, relational egalitarians do not clearly specify the setting in which we should take each other's arguments seriously. They want to "scale up" but do not say how. If relational egalitarianism will be a plausible theory of justice, it must figure out ways to do so. We suggest one way to scale up here. We think we can make some headway on this matter, by focusing on what we call *credence*. Our intent is to test one aspect of what it means to regards one's fellow citizens, and their arguments, as equals. We are pushing relational egalitarianism in a new direction, but one that is compatible with its advocates' aspirations.

***Understanding Mechanisms***

In the fall of 2017, one of us received a note from a newspaper delivery person, which we include as Figure 1. As one can see, it has abysmal writing. Based on his occupation, this note comes from a low-status person, but if he wanted to express political views, a big obstacle might not be status *per se*, but rather the ability to express his ideas clearly.

This episode called our attention to an additional limitation of the existing normative work on status: it seldom stipulates the mechanisms by which status might become associated with the ability to have one's voice heard. One possibility—the one that is implicit in the normative work—is that people attend to status *per se*—that when they listen to a person express an opinion, they are attentive to his or her social standing, and assign credit to the views on that basis. An alternative possibility is that status is correlated with some other characteristic that influences one's ability to be heard—essentially that the link between status and credence is a byproduct of a distinct causal relationship. In this case, a low-status person like the newspaper carrier whose letter appears in Figure 1 might not be ignored because he is low-status, but rather because he happens to communicate poorly.[5]

This distinction matters. Both possibilities imply an ecological correlation between social status and having one's views be attended to. But they suggest different remedies. If citizens dismiss the views of low-status individuals simply because they are low-status, the remedy is to educate the listeners and help them see their biases, or change the social structure so status differences are narrowed. But if low-status individuals are being dismissed because of how they express their views, the remedy might be to help them communicate

[5] There is a third, more nuanced possibility: perhaps social status and communication skills work in conjunction, such as if poor communication skills were to *activate* discrimination—specifically against low-status individuals. We consider this possibility head-on in a follow-up test discussed below.

effectively, or to find advocates who can clarify and amplify their concerns or teach listeners to be more attentive.

We cannot be exhaustive in testing ways in which status might ecologically become associated with the ability to be heard in the political arena, but we designed our tests below to identify the independent role that communication skills might play in causing some political views to be ignored.

***Benefits of Middle-Range Theorizing***

As we suggest above, one benefit that comes from submitting the normative conjectures about status to an empirical test is that one is confronted with interpretive issues that require concretizing abstract (and sometimes vague) concepts. Here, we discuss three issues we confronted in designing a test of how a person's social status affects his or her ability to be heard. As will become clear, resolving these issues necessarily required narrowing our focus to some specific questions while leaving others for subsequent work.

The first critical question we confronted in specifying our tests was: *in what contexts might a person's social status affect how much her views are attended to?* We decided to test overtly *political* communication, since the focus of relational egalitarians is how citizens relate to one another, and how their political claims are evaluated by each other. But as we discuss above, the face-to-face examples provided by Anderson and Scheffler are limited in helping us think about structural implications.[6] People rarely deliberate about politics in intimate settings; and when they do, it is even rarer that they encounter political disagreement (Mutz 2006; 2002).[7]

[6] See also Fiske (2010) and (Ridgeway & Nakagawa 2014; York and Cornwell 2006; Strodtbeck, James, and Hawkins 1957). Carnes and Lupu (2016) tested whether politician social status (being a factory worker or business owner) affected voters' support. They found no differences at all, though this null result might be attributable to the subtle and somewhat unrealistic status manipulation their studies employ.

[7] A possible exception is the workplace (e.g. Huckfeld et al. 1995), but even here, citizens are probably homogeneous in terms of status and might seldom discuss political affairs.

For these reasons, we focus on the role of status in the context of mass communication—commentary on a politically-focused article that appeared on a news site on the internet. This design choice might seem unusual, since this context removes some of the visual and verbal cues—appearance, attire, manner of speaking, and so on—that could convey a person's status. Yet communication in public forums is (or is at least hoped to be) one of the main engines of political persuasion—the place where arguments compete on their merits and where one voice has the potential to sway a multitude. Even in a fragmented media environment (Prior 2007) citizens are most likely to grapple with discordant political views—including from people of different status—in such forums. There is also a practical advantage. Unlike an in-person study, we can run an experiment that tightly controls what subjects see and experience.

Our main focus is whether people are more likely to view the writings of a low-status person as less important or of lower quality than the same writings of a high-status person. Relational egalitarians contend that the views of low-status people will not be given the same credence as those with higher status; our studies are designed to test this in one particular setting.

A second conceptual question we confronted in designing our studies is: *whose status matters: the speaker or the listener?*[8] The social equality literature is unclear on this point. One way to interpret the concerns of social egalitarians is to say that they are concerned that views expressed by low-status speakers are dismissed—by low-status and high-status listeners alike.[9] More formally, the conjecture is that social status of a speaker has a *ceteris*

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[8] We use the terms "speaker" and "listener" loosely: they refer to any mode of communication (including written), not just to verbal communication.

[9] Rawls (an important influence on many social egalitarians), writes that "Significant political and economic inequalities are often associated with inequalities of social status that encourage those of lower status to be viewed *both by themselves and by others* as inferior" (Rawls 2001).

*paribus* effect on listening. An alternative formulation is that specifically high-status individuals dismiss views expressed by low-status individuals.[10] The formal interpretation here is different: it amounts to an interactive effect in which the effect of a speaker's status *depends* on the listener's status: high-status listeners might exhibit dismissive responses, even while low-status listeners are agnostic to a speaker's status. Finally, though we are not aware of social egalitarians speculating along these lines, we can imagine other formulations as well. For instance, listeners might exhibit an affinity for their *own* social status. ("Like seeks like.") Below, we adopt an encompassing approach: we use a design that separates listener and speaker status, and allows the data speak to how they interact.

The third critical question we confronted in specifying our tests was: *what characteristics convey a person's status?* One approach we considered for instrumenting social status was to manipulate a speaker's race or gender, given research that these traits are associated with different status levels (Ridgeway and Nakagawa, 2014). But this approach would not be a discriminating test of social status as a construct of its own stand-alone importance. As we note above, *all* liberals oppose hierarchies based on arbitrary demographic traits. For social status to survive as an independently significant in how equality is conceptualized, it should be able to show its influence in a way not reliant on these other characteristics. While relational egalitarians say that status is independent of wealth, they regularly characterize wealth as an important—perhaps preeminent—marker of social status.[11] We could not think of a way for our instrumentation directly to signal a

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[10] Anderson says that high-status individuals should be reminded that "while they may be entitled under the law to a greater share, this is no ground for them to think that they are superior to others" (Anderson, 2008b, 254).

[11] For example, Anderson argues that "the fundamental reason for egalitarians to seek constraints at the top is that income and wealth do not buy only frivolities. They buy . . . superior social standing" (Anderson 2008, 266). (See also (Miller 1997, 235; Schuppert, 2015; Fourie, 2012; Schemmel, 2011; Anderson, 1999; Anderson, 2008b; Scheffler, 2015).

person's wealth while preserving experimental naturalism—it would come across as haughty to brag about wealth in persuasive communication—but we did find it possible and naturalistic to manipulate a person's occupation. Occupation is often used as a workable proxy via which to manipulate perceived wealth and social status (York and Cornwell, 2006; Hollingshead, 2011; Ridgeway and Nakagawa, 2014)—a relationship we confirm in external manipulation checks, described below.

### *Experiments on Social Status and Listening*

We conducted two experiments examining how social status and communication skills affect the extent to which a person's political views are attended to and given credence. Participants evaluated a political message about each of three topics: increasing spending on infrastructure projects, imposing new restrictions on the use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in agriculture, and the United States participating in free trade agreements. We randomly assigned the order in which the messages were evaluated. In a separate randomization, we assigned the message itself to be one of three types: a well-written message from a high-status individual; a well-written message from a low-status individual; or a poorly-written message from a low-status individual. Thus, we employ a within-subject design, which is especially well suited to isolate effects of a random assignment where repeated measurement is feasible (Kirk 2012).

One question that might arise, given our design, is why we did not include a poorly-written message from a high-status individual, which would make for a fully-crossed design. Our initial round of studies omitted this condition because we thought that such a message would strike respondents as unrealistic. However, we collected additional data to address limitations arising from this choice, as we discuss after presenting our main studies.

*Participants*. Study 1 recruited a sample (N=356) of subjects via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing service. MTurk is a convenience sample, though results generated from studies conducted on MTurk have been shown to compare favorably with studies conducted in the lab (e.g. Buhrmeister 2011) and on nationally representative samples (e.g. Berinsky et al. 2012). However, few MTurk respondents come from the high end of the income distribution. As such, this sample is not well suited to test one conjecture discussed above: that credence is a function of both a speaker's *and* a listener's status. Thus, for Study 2, we hired a survey firm (Survey Sampling International—SSI, now called Dynata) to recruit a sample stratified by household income. The dataset for Study 2 (N=1,033) includes 302 respondents who, in our instrument, report their annual household income to be below $20k; 298 who report their income to be between $40k and $80k; and 301 who report their income to be above $150k.[12] These levels correspond closely with the 20th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of income in the United States. Additionally, because we suspected that participant race might affect his or her own social status, we recruited whites only—thereby holding this potential confounding factor constant.[13] Otherwise, Study 2 is targeted to meet Census benchmarks for age, gender, and region. (We report demographic information in the SI.) The sample characteristics in Study 2—in particular a large enough sample of very high-

[12] To maximize our ability to contrast income extremes, we requested that SSI recruit three hundred participants in each of these three ranges, and not to recruit subjects whose income was in some other range. The difference between our intended sample size (900) and the actual sample size (1,033) arises because the income some subjects reported in our instrument differed from the income SSI had on file, and we requested SSI continue recruitment until we reached the targets for each of our prespecified categories.

[13] We readily acknowledge that race and social status might be deeply intertwined. But if the concept of status does not simply reduce to the concept of race—if status merits attention in its own right—then it should be able to demonstrate importance when race is put aside, as we intentionally do here. We leave empirical work linking status and race to future studies.

income Americans to study experimentally—are rare in survey research and a valuable attribute of the research reported below.

Study 1 was fielded in January of 2017 and Study 2 was fielded in February of 2017. Aside from the different sample and the omission of open-ended measures (to satisfy length constraints), Study 2 is an exact replication of Study 1. As such, we discuss the two studies together.

*Procedure.* Participants began the study by reporting whether they favored or opposed three proposed policies that were being discussed at the time: increasing spending on infrastructure, imposing new restrictions on the use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in agriculture, and the United States joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).[14] Next, participants were asked to answer questions about comments supposedly posted online in response to articles that appeared in the *Des Moines Register* about each of these topics. We manipulated the status of the comment author by stating the author's occupation in the text introducing each comment. For instance, for one comment, the introductory text characterized it as coming from either "a farmhand at a corporate wheat farm in Iowa" or "the owner of a corporate wheat farm in Iowa." We selected the short descriptions used on the basis of a manipulation check conducted on an external sample wherein we confirmed that the descriptions substantially influenced the letter writer's perceived social status and income—but had a trivial influence on potential confounding factors: letter writer's ideology and perceived novelty of the letter. We report details on this important validation in the SI.

To manipulate communication skills, we began with a well-written comment, and then substituted, phrase by phrase, prominent missteps: misspellings, typos, inappropriate

[14] We report all question wording and experimental stimuli in the Supporting Information (SI).

capitalization, and more rudimentary vocabulary.[15] We were careful to keep the *substantive* content of each letter the same; the poorly-written letters did not make fundamentally less-sound arguments than the well-written letters. Rather, the very same ideas were presented with less polish. The text of each comment included three specific reasons for the author's particular opinion about the topic.[16] To increase naturalism, all comments were mocked up to look like the screenshot of a comment on a real newspaper article.

While each letter was on the screen, we asked the respondent to report on a five-point scale 1) what the quality of the reasoning in the letter is, 2) how likeable the author of the letter is, and 3) how important it is for the ideas expressed in the article to be part of public debate about this issue. These measures were selected to capture three distinct ways writer status might influence how a message is perceived. Jointly, they are indicative of how much credence a reader gives to an argument. Our measures assume that the more a reader thinks the quality of an argument is good and that the argument is important, the more credence the reader gives to the argument. Since the substance of each letter is the same, these measures are designed to test one key concern of relational egalitarians: whether the argument of low-status citizens are given less credence (or regarded less) than those of high-status citizens. While likability is not exactly the same as regarding someone as equal, if we do not like someone, it suggests we regard them less than others. Moreover, likeability is an important antecedent to taking a person's message seriously (Sniderman et al. 1991, ch. 6).

15 See Neiman (2017) for a similar approach in a field experiment.

16 The GMO author opposed restrictions on GMOs (a conservative position). The TPP author opposed the TPP (a liberal position). The infrastructure author supported more spending on infrastructure (an ideologically ambiguous position). We chose these issue positions such that any particular respondent would likely read opinions with which they agreed, and also with which they disagreed.

After evaluating all three letters, subjects in Study 1 proceeded to an open-ended recall task designed to measure how much information from each letter they retained in memory. (Due to length constraints, this step was not included in Study 2.) For each letter (in a random order), we asked subjects to write down as many reasons (of the three mentioned in each letter) as they could recall. A coder who was blind to the assigned status of each letter writer read these responses and coded the number of reasons correctly reported, from zero to three.

The instrument ended with a series of demographic questions. Finally, we also measured whether the respondent could recall the occupation of each letter writer—an internal manipulation check assessing whether they paid attention to our mechanism for randomly assigning status.

*Results*. First, we assess whether respondents attended to the status of the letter writer. They did. For all three letter topics, participants correctly recalled the writer's occupation at greater than chance rates, and a formal test confirms that the answers were attentive to the treatment.[17]

This assurance allows us to examine whether participants heard the messages differently, depending on the status of the letter writer. Table 1 reports how the mean values for our main dependent measures vary as a function of the treatment condition, in both Studies 1 and 2. The direct effect of status, holding communication skills constant, can be assessed by comparing the values in column 2 to column 3, or column 5 to column 6. As can be seen, evidence that the status of the letter writer influences how much credence one gives

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[17] Across three topics in two different samples (totaling six chi-squared tests), all p-values are below 0.001.

to an argument is lacking. There is no reliable pattern across conditions, and differences in means are attributable to chance. (There is one statistically significant difference in Study 1, but with twenty-eight pairwise comparisons across the two studies, this difference is unremarkable.) The full compass of results lead us to conclude that the effect of status—instrumented as we did—is minute.[18]

Communication skills, on the other hand, have a consistent and pronounced effect—both across measures and across issues. (Compare column 1 to column 2 and column 4 to column 5.) For the *Quality*, *Liking*, and *Importance* dependent measures, effects center around ten percent of the range of the measure—a reasonably large effect. The open-ended recall measure (available in Study 1 only) is a more demanding test, but here too, participants remembered less about the comment they read when it was poorly written than when it was well-written ($p<.01$). Status itself had no significant effect. Figure 2 plots means by condition (averages, pooled across issues, only), and illustrates the consistency of the pattern: communication skills damage perceptions; status itself does not. When people read a poorly written letter, they give considerably less credence to the argument than they do to a well-written article: how one communicates is more important than status when it comes to giving credence to an argument.

Next, we assess how social status—gauged by income—of study participants moderates treatment effects. To do so, we segment the SSI sample, as planned *ex ante*, into three income categories: respondents whose household income is less than $20k per year (N=302), those whose income is between $40k and $60k per year (N=298), and those whose

[18] We are all the more confident that status—instrumented as we do here—has a scant effect on listening because we conducted an earlier study that manipulated status in a nearly identical way, and it generated at nearly identical (i.e. null) results. These earlier null results for social status helped develop our interest in communication skills and are available on request.

income is more than $150k per year (N=301).[19] We pool all responses together and estimate the following model:

Dependent variable = $\beta_0$ + $\beta_{1,2}$ Author Assignment dummies +

$\beta_{3,4}$ Income category dummies +

$\beta_{5,6}$ Education category dummies +

$\beta_{7\text{-}10}$ Author Assignment × Income interactions +

$\beta_{11\text{-}14}$ Author Assignment × Education interactions +

$\beta_{15\text{-}19}$ Agreement and Topic dummies and interactions + $\upsilon_j$ + $\varepsilon$,

where income categories are coded as described above, the respondent's education is coded into three categories (less than a BA, N=521; BA only, N=307; Graduate degree, N=205), topics are dummies for each letter topic, and agreement is a dummy variable (for each letter) that takes a value of 1 if (based on the policy questions at the outset of our instrument) the respondent agreed with the author's issue opinion and 0 otherwise, and $\upsilon_j$ is a respondent-level random effect. We incorporate respondent education into the model because education and income are empirically separable in our dataset,[20] and controlling for both simultaneously allows us to examine how much each drives differences in message

[19] Thus, to sharpen the differences by income category, we exclude respondents (N=132) whose income is not in one of these bins from this analysis. (These individuals are in the dataset because of discrepancies between SSI's recorded income information for them and the information they reported on our instrument, see fn 14.)

[20] We present a cross tabulation between education and income in the SI. They exhibit enough separation for statistical control. In particular, 16.0% of high-income respondents have less than a college education, and 39.5% have a BA, but no advanced degree. Including education in the model does not influence our conclusions as concerns the role of income. When we omit education measures from the model, we continue to find that high-income respondents provide less-favorable evaluations than low-income respondents, but there are no substantial income × social status interactions.

evaluation. The measures that capture respondent agreement with the author and intercepts for each topic are not necessary inclusions, since these are pre-treatment variables orthogonal to randomly assigned status. Still, their inclusion improves the precision of our treatment effect estimates (Gerber & Green 2012, 102-15).

We present the full model in the SI, and summarize the key relationships here. Figure 3 presents predicted means at various combinations of respondent income and random assignment, with other measures held at their means. The results speak to several questions.

First, does granting credence to an argument depend on the listener's status? Yes. High-income participants provided lower ratings for each dependent measure, and in each randomly assigned condition. For all three outcomes, their responses are statistically distinguishable from low-income respondents (all $p<.03$). They are also distinguishable from middle-income respondents in evaluations of Quality ($p<.04$) and Importance ($p<.01$), though differences for the Likability measure are more tentative ($p<.10$). Low- and middle-income respondents do not significantly differ, on average, for any outcome. We conclude that high-income individuals are, as a general matter, more harsh in their evaluations.

It is a separate matter to assess whether high-income individuals are *especially* harsh in their evaluation of low-status writers. Visually, this result would manifest as a widening gap between high-income respondents and other respondents as one reads from the top lines to the middle lines in Figure 3. Here, evidence is more tentative. For the Quality measure, high-income respondents provide more negative evaluations than respondents at other income levels, but the result is consistent with a pattern of general negativity from high-status people, rather than particular discrimination against low-status writers. For Liking and Importance, the gap between high-status participants and other respondents indeed widens, but when we conduct the appropriate statistical test—examining interactions between the condition dummy and the high-income dummy—there is no reliable evidence that high-income respondents penalize low-status writers more than other respondents do. (For Quality, $\beta$=-0.004, SE=0.033, p=.89. For Likability, $\beta$=-0.040, SE=0.034, p=.23. For Importance, $\beta$=-0.030, SE=0.032, p=.36.)

What about the penalty applied to poorly-written comments? As Figure 3 illustrates, respondents of all income levels evaluate the poorly-written letter harshly. (Differences between the well-written and poorly-written letter are statistically significant for every measure and every respondent income level at $p<.01$.) But are any respondent income levels especially harsh in their evaluations of poorly-written letters? Again, there is little evidence that they are. Examining the appropriate interaction terms, none are statistically significant, nor particularly close. (The smallest p-value is p=.16.)

We conclude that respondent status is associated with harsh message evaluations, but that this harshness is applied evenly: high-income respondents evaluate messages from low-status authors negatively—but not *more* negatively than a message from a high-status author. Moreover, low-status respondents penalize poorly-written letters about as much as high-status respondents do.

The null pattern of results for participant income—high-income respondents do not exhibit a particular prejudice against low-status authors—led us to investigate whether some related division in our data might reveal more pronounced rejection of political views from low-status authors. A prime contender here is education: perhaps education (rather than income) socializes people to think of themselves as superior, and to dismiss views from lower-status individuals. As we note above, the targeted sampling strategy we use in Study 2 gives us some capacity to distinguish effects due to education from those due to income. However, education appears to be less prognostic of the dependent measures than income is. Figure 4 breaks out (using the same regression model) the dependent measures by participant education and the random assignment. As can be seen, there are no significant differences by education within-conditions, nor any significant condition education × interactions.

*Addressing Design Limitations*. We employed a within-subjects design to increase statistical power, and so that we could simultaneously examine relational equality across a range of political issues. One drawback of this approach is that, since each subjects evaluate three messages, they might glean the purpose of the study as they proceed through it, and perhaps modify behavior in response. A straightforward check on this possibility is to limit the analysis to only the first issue each subject examined—essentially converting the study to a purely between-subjects design. In the SI, we present such an analysis, finding again that effects attributable to communication skills are more pronounced than those due to social status.

A separate concern might arise from our decision to use a three-condition design (rather than one that fully crossed communication skills and status cues). We opted for a three-condition design because we expected a poorly-written message—one rife with misspellings and malapropisms—to be unrealistic when ostensibly coming from a high-status individual, such as a CEO. However, after our initial round of studies, we received a constructive criticism of this approach: perhaps social status and communication skills work in conjunction, such as if poor communication skills were to *activate* discrimination against low-status individuals. In this case, social status would be playing an important role, since it would function as a sort of necessary condition for poor communication skills to have the effects described above. But we would be ill-suited to demonstrate as much empirically. To address this limitation, we conducted a study on a new sample. The additional study parallels the SSI study described above, but adds a High-Status / Unpolished writing condition, making for a fully-crossed design. As we discuss in the SI, this additional study replicates the findings above. More to the point, it finds no evidence of an interactive relationship between status and communication skills: participants give less credence to poor writing irrespective of whether it comes from a low- or high-status author. In the age of Twitter, high-status people who are poor writers may be given less credence in ways that were less likely in previous eras.

***Discussion and conclusion***

Relational egalitarians assume that high-status citizens look down on low-status citizens and are apt to dismiss their views as unimportant. But they do so without evidence. We manipulated the social status of a person offering a political viewpoint and examined effects on credence given to the viewpoint. Social status exhibited trace effects on how much participants recalled about what they read, liking of the author, and the perceived quality and importance of the views expressed. This pattern of null results holds even within respondents who themselves are high- or low-status.

When it comes to giving credence to the arguments of low-status citizens, relational egalitarians might be mistaken to worry about disparate income levels *per se*, but they may want to think instead about the different possible causes of how and why people give little credence to the arguments of others. There may be other reasons to worry about the wealthy—it is certainly possible that the wealthy have more political influence than is warranted by democratic equality, for example, or large wealth disparities may undermine economic opportunity for the poor—but our focus here is on the relational aspects of citizenship that represent a key component of social egalitarianism. Our study comes with certain limitations, since we only study the effect of status in one context: mass political communication. Some may wonder whether high-status citizens do ignore low-status citizens in other contexts. Perhaps, but at a minimum, our work shows that we should not presume such a relationship to exist until it is demonstrated empirically.

However, our studies do show that some people are ignored more than others. In this, relational egalitarians' core claim is correct, even if our findings reorient some of their concerns. The worry at the heart of social equality is that the voices of some people will be ignored simply because it is *their* voice – not because of the content of their argument. Our finding that some people are given less credence because they are hard to understand, because their manner of communicating violates a social norm, or because their communication skills signal a low-status is consistent with the general worry of relational egalitarians.[21] While testimonial injustice focuses on the voices of oppressed social group members who are discounted in interpersonal settings, our study has implications for this idea if the focus of testimonial injustice expands (as Anderson suggests it should) to include structural factors. Bad communicators are not traditionally viewed as an oppressed social group, but they are a group that shares a characteristic that causes others to give them less credence, and at least for some of them, we can point to poor education as the cause of their communication challenges (a structural factor).

Yet the relational egalitarian solution to the problem of differential status is misplaced. Paradoxically, while relational egalitarians argue that there is too much emphasis on income and equality in the literature on distributive justice, their solution to the problem of status differences is to decrease income inequality. By contrast, Fricker suggests that

[21] All of these possibilities are consistent with our results, and we leave it to future work to adjudicate among them.

ending epistemic injustice demands that individuals become more attentive to the ways in which people discount others because of their social group membership (Fricker 2007)—the sort of individualistic solution that Anderson argues is insufficient. Our studies imply that the answer to the problem of granting less credence to those who cannot communicate well is some combination of teaching citizens to be better listeners – to not turn away simply because someone does not communicate—and to better educate poor communicators so that their ideas are less likely to be dismissed by others. Sometimes, we need structural solutions and individual virtue (encouraged through education) to work hand-in-hand.

Whether epistemic justice advocates want to scale up like relational egalitarians is unclear, so we conclude with the implications our studies have for relational egalitarianism. Our studies have three major implications for future work on relational equality, status, and listening. First, our studies highlight crucial normative questions that relational egalitarians would do well to discuss. Does esteem always violate democratic equality, or are there conditions when it is acceptable? We might give more credence to those who communicate well—but does this pattern violate equality? If democracies place a premium on discussion, is it wrong to esteem those who speak well? Would social egalitarians object to people holding talented orators in high esteem? How about talented chemists or philosophers? We raise these questions not to answer them, but to point to the kind of theoretical and empirical work that relational egalitarians ought to do if they want to clarify their ideas. Anderson argues that "Egalitarians aim to abolish such hierarchies and replace them with relations of equality — equal respect, power, and standing. Where replacement is not practical, egalitarians aim to sharply limit the grounds on which hierarchy can be based" (Anderson, 2008b, 264). The challenge here is not just that the idea of practicality is undefined, but three sentences later Anderson suggests that some perceptions of esteem are acceptable, and not just begrudgingly so: "Egalitarians prefer that individuals be free to judge for themselves who merits esteem, without being held to an official standard. The expected and preferred outcome of such liberty is a plurality of conceptions of the good, which generate rival and cross-cutting orders of esteem, such that no social group comes out on the top or bottom of everyone's rankings, all are free to seek and establish a social circle in which they enjoy the esteem of their peers…" (Anderson, 2008b, 264) But what this mean for how citizens should think of esteem is vague.

Second, our studies highlight empirical relationships that require better understanding. We show one mechanism (beyond traditional markers like race, gender, and caste) by which social inequality can undermine political equality. But we certainly have not explored all the possible channels. It is possible that rural people and the elderly are looked down upon by others and that their concerns are ignored (Bidadanure, 2016; Cramer, 2016). Additionally, our studies focus on listening. We have not examined—though future work could—the extent to which status differentials affect a person's likelihood of expressing his or her opinions publicly. Such an investigation would have promising overlap with a literature that finds feelings of political efficacy to be an important antecedent to political action (Beaumont 2011, for an entry point). In short, relational egalitarians should think of status and esteem in more diverse ways than they have done; but to determine if their ideas have any purchase, they will need to move beyond broad abstractions and commit to concrete, falsifiable propositions.

Third, changing the focus of democratic deliberation to the context of mass communication offers a different view of status and listening than do many other studies of status *and* is different than the direct deliberative examples used by many relational egalitarians. But this change more realistically mirrors how people of different status levels actually communicate. Since political communication runs through instruments such as newspapers and websites, we think this is good reason to study how status and other identities affect listening in mediated settings. As relational egalitarians think about how to fill out their ideas to create an alternative to distributive theories of justice, they should think of the contexts in which citizenship and status matter. We hope we have provided one jumping off point from which they can do so.

Table 1: Communication Skills—But Not Status—Affect Listening

| | *Study 1* | | | *Study 2* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Low-status / Unpolished | Low-status / Polished | High-status / Polished | Low-status / Unpolished | Low-status / Polished | High-status / Polished |
| *Quality* | | | | | | |
| GMO | 0.38 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.64 (0.02) [a] | 0.62 (0.03) [b] | 0.42 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.61 (0.01) [a] | 0.59 (0.01) [b] |
| Infrastructure | 0.54 (0.03) [a,b] | 0.74 (0.02) [a] | 0.75 (0.02) [b] | 0.57 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.66 (0.01) [a] | 0.69 (0.01) [b] |
| TPP | 0.48 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.62 (0.02) [a,c] | 0.70 (0.02) [b,c] | 0.52 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.61 (0.01) [a] | 0.62 (0.01) [b] |
| Pooled | 0.47 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.67 (0.01) [a] | 0.69 (0.01) [b] | 0.51 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.62 (0.01) [a] | 0.63 (0.01) [b] |
| *Liking* | | | | | | |
| GMO | 0.38 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.55 (0.02) [a] | 0.55 (0.02) [b] | 0.39 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.53 (0.01) [a] | 0.54 (0.01) [b] |
| Infrastructure | 0.45 (0.03) [a,b] | 0.64 (0.02) [a] | 0.62 (0.02) [b] | 0.50 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.58 (0.01) [a] | 0.61 (0.01) [b] |
| TPP | 0.42 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.54 (0.02) [a] | 0.56 (0.02) [b] | 0.46 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.53 (0.01) [a] | 0.52 (0.01) [b] |
| Pooled | 0.42 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.58 (0.01) [a] | 0.58 (0.01) [b] | 0.45 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.55 (0.01) [a] | 0.56 (0.01) [b] |
| *Importance* | | | | | | |
| GMO | 0.51 (0.03) [a,b] | 0.67 (0.02) [a] | 0.69 (0.02) [b] | 0.53 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.64 (0.01) [a] | 0.66 (0.01) [b] |
| Infrastructure | 0.62 (0.03) [a,b] | 0.73 (0.02) [a] | 0.73 (0.02) [b] | 0.62 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.68 (0.01) [a] | 0.69 (0.01) [b] |
| TPP | 0.62 (0.03) [b] | 0.68 (0.02) | 0.72 (0.02) [b] | 0.62 (0.01) | 0.64 (0.01) | 0.64 (0.01) |
| Pooled | 0.58 (0.02) [a,b] | 0.69 (0.01) [a] | 0.71 (0.01) [b] | 0.58 (0.01) [a,b] | 0.65 (0.01) [a] | 0.66 (0.01) [b] |
| *Recall* | | | | | | |
| GMO | 1.64 (0.10) [b] | 1.72 (0.10) | 1.90 (0.08) [b] | | | |
| Infrastructure | 1.37 (0.09) | 1.60 (0.09) | 1.40 (0.09) | | | |
| TPP | 0.97 (0.07) [b] | 1.04 (0.09) | 1.21 (0.08) [b] | | | |
| Pooled | 1.32 (0.05) [a,b] | 1.46 (0.06) [a] | 1.51 (0.05) [b] | | | |

Cell entries are means, by condition, with standard errors in parentheses. Quality, Liking, and Importance are scaled from 0 to 1. Recall is the number of message arguments recalled, which ranges from 0 to 3. Entries with shared superscripts are statistically distinguishable from each other ($p<.05$).

**Acknowledgements**: We would like to thank Tali Mendelberg, Spencer Piston, Alex Kirshner, Ian MacMullen, and Geneviève Rousselière, along with three anonymous reviewers, for comments on earlier versions of this article. A previous versions of this manuscript was presented at the political science workshop at Dartmouth College, where we received invaluable feedback. We also thank Cole Stanley for his research support.

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