Equality Feels Better

Status Anxiety and Well-Being in European Societies

Status anxiety – the feeling of not counting much in the eyes of fellow citizens – belongs to the rarely studied negative aspects of subjective well-being. Yet this may change with the influential book The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone, written by the British health researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010). They claim that egalitarian societies are better societies with less social problems, precisely because people have less reason to be anxious about their status under the condition of equality. However, much about status anxiety in this book is speculation. This article examines the phenomenon empirically, demonstrating how status anxiety is taking a toll on general well-being; the countries in which status anxiety is most prevalent; and what role income inequality plays as a breeding condition for status anxiety.

In recent years, there has been considerable talk of "status insecurity", typically in the sense of people's self-regarding worries about their future: about becoming unemployed or falling down the social ladder. The spirit level theory (henceforth: SL theory) – and this article as well – deals with another kind of worry, which is rooted in the present and stems from social comparisons: status anxiety. It involves being disregarded by other people because we fail to meet society's norms of success, be it in terms of salary, occupation or education (cf. de Botton 2004). In keeping with Veblen (1989), the underlying agonizing question is: Do I meet the "norms of respectability"?

Status anxiety is the cornerstone of the spirit level theory

According to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), it is precisely this kind of status anxiety which gnaws at the psyche and the health of people in affluent societies. Furthermore, it elicits behavior by which people harm themselves and others in the long run. The theory goes that the greater the income gap is between rich and poor, the more widespread status anxiety becomes. It is precisely for this reason that a number of social problems, from crime to obesity, are more common in unequal societies. The remedy Wilkinson and Pickett prescribe is income redistribution. In contrast, increasing overall prosperity further does not solve these social problems, because "we have got to the end of what economic growth can do for us" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: 5). Quality of life, both individually and collectively, no longer improves alongside rising income. Since rich countries have passed this point already, the SL theory claims, only greater equality can increase well-being and make our societies better places – not only for the poor and vulnerable, but also for the rich and powerful.

The SL theory conceptualizes status anxiety as the "causal mechanism" which sits between inequality and social problems. Yet Wilkinson and Pickett do not provide any straightforward empirical evidence – neither for the link between inequality and status anxiety, nor for the link between status anxiety and social problems. Throughout the book, status anxiety remains an unmeasured concept. The evidence they muster are psychological experiments on so-called "social evaluative threats" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: 37ff.), which demonstrated that people feel particularly stressed when their performance is evaluated by others. They also consult on biological research about stress levels and hierarchies in animal societies, and assimilate cultural-sociological diagnoses about the role of pride and shame as two fundamental human emotions which are connected with social status in a characteristic way. A lower status typically gives us fewer reasons for being proud and more reasons for feeling inadequate. The plausible conclusion Wilkinson and Pickett draw is that unequal societies give rise to stronger feelings of status anxiety, but this claim remains speculation and is not demonstrated empirically.

Status anxiety and the social gradient

The suspicion that a low rank impairs one's self-esteem is hardly new to sociology. Still, a milestone of inspiration is the The Hidden Injuries of Class, in which Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) uncovered widespread feelings of personal inadequacy among the American working class. More recent research from the US has focused on the emotional suffering of "McJob" workers (Newman and Ellis 1999). Both contributions assume that status anxiety is mainly an issue further down the social ladder. In contrast, another giant of social theory suggests that no class will be entirely free from status concerns. It was Thorstein Veblen who saw "envious comparisons" at work in all social classes, since people have a tendency to compare themselves upwards:

"The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance" (Veblen 1989: 57).

As a consequence, status anxiety might well reach far into the upper middle class, or even into the upper class. What is new about the SL theory is the idea of a contextual effect of income inequality affecting all members of society, no matter their status in the social pecking order.

From the perspective of human well-being, it is crucial to note the extent to which status anxiety takes a toll on people's general happiness, i.e. their overall life satisfaction. Veblen suspected that a human being could bear persistent disrespect with great difficulty: whoever fails to conform to consumption norms, he reasoned, not only loses the respect from fellow citizens, but his self-respect as well, "since the usual basis of self-respect is the respect accorded by one's neighbours" (Veblen 1989: 22). Only people with a strong character can stay self-confident when confronted with the contempt of other people. This theoretical reasoning conforms well to more recent conceptual models on how people arrive at an overall evaluation of their life, e.g. in the sequence model of life evaluation (Veenhoven 2007). Experiences of inferiority, inadequacy and contempt of others are examples of negative experiences in the continuous current of life events, which shift our affect balance to the negative if experienced frequently. Moreover, such negative experiences also affect the cognitive path to life satisfaction, since our life as it is falls short of how our life should be. Consequently, the comparison of reality and the ideal turns out negative. For these two reasons, a negative correlation between status anxiety and life satisfaction is more than likely.

Status anxiety has been mainly a concern for social theory, and has been empirically studied in psychological experiments and qualitative research. What is lacking so far is a quantitative account of the phenomenon based on representative surveys, ideally in a cross-national comparative perspective. This is exactly the gap which this short article attempts to fill. Against the background of the SL theory, the guiding questions are: (1) To what extent do the various income classes within societies differ in their experience of status anxiety? (2) Does status anxiety convert into lower life satisfaction? (3) Do citizens of more unequal societies feel more anxious about their status? (4) Does this link between inequality and status anxiety apply for all income groups (including the well-off), or for the poorest income group only?

To provide answers, we employ data from the second wave of the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) from 2007.[1] This survey is conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Wor-

Graph 1: Average status anxiety (0–1) by income quartile in six countries
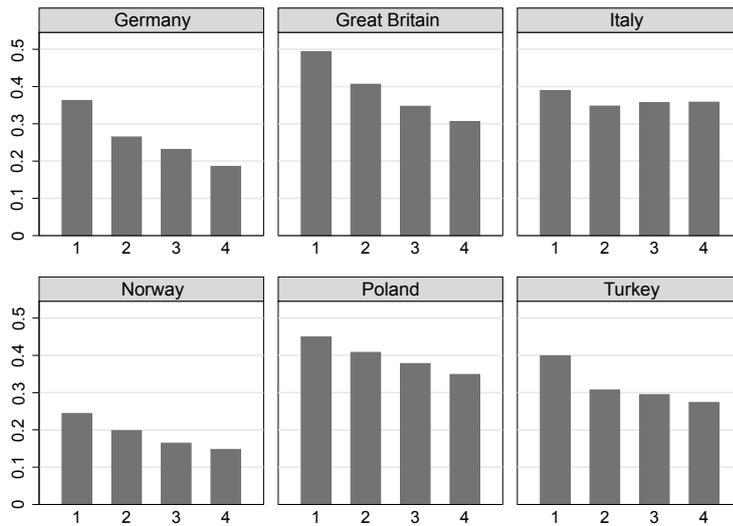
1 = lowest quartile; 4 = highest quartile

Database: EQLS 2007

king Conditions (Eurofound), an agency of the European Union. The main goal is to measure the quality of life of Europeans in different domains of life using both objective and subjective indicators. The EQLS round 2 was conducted in 31 countries: the 27 EU member states, Norway and three candidate countries for EU membership (a list of countries is provided in graph 2). The surveys are nationally representative samples of the population aged 18 and over, with 1000 to 2000 interviews conducted in each country. As part of a longer item battery, two questions are pertinent for measuring status anxiety:

Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree with each statement.
f) I don't feel the value of what I do is recognised by others.
g) Some people look down on me because of my job situation or income.

Both items correlate so well with one another that it is justified to combine them into a summary index of "status anxiety". The responses were recoded in such a way that the final scores ranged between 0 and 1. The maximum value of 1 means that the respondent strongly agrees with both statements, and hence is very concerned about his status; a value of 0 means that the respondent strongly disagrees with both statements, thus can be regarded as free from status anxiety. Respondents with at least one missing response were excluded from the analysis, typically at around 5% per country (the exception, Turkey, had an item non-response of slightly more than 10%). A total of 33,647 cases were included in the analysis.

Life satisfaction is measured using a standard indicator: "All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? [scale: from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied)]".

An important explanatory variable at the micro level is household income, which is provided in the data set as equivalence-weighted net household income, grouped into four income quartiles. The key variable at the macro level is the degree of inequality, which was measured by the Gini Index of income distribution in 2005 (data taken from EurLife, a database set up by Eurofound). The gap between rich and poor is quite narrow in Slovenia (Gini of 22) and Sweden (Gini of 23), while the gap is much larger in Portugal (41) and Turkey (46). Another important country characteristic is the level of prosperity, which is measured as per capita income in purchasing power parities. The wealthiest EQLS countries are

Luxembourg and Norway with EUR 58,000 and 38,600 respectively; the poorest are Bulgaria and Turkey with EUR 7,500 and 7,200 respectively (income data taken from EurLife).

Status anxiety is not a huge problem for many europeans

We begin with a brief look at how respondents answered the two status anxiety questions. 19% of Europeans felt that what they do is not valued by others ("strongly agree" and "agree" combined). A further 19% chose the middle category; that is, they neither agree with the statement, nor do they reject it. As to the second item, 14% of Europeans feel that others look down on them; a further 13% chose the middle category. The mean score of the Status Anxiety Index is .31 (on a 0–1 scale). On the one hand, these figures suggest that status anxiety is not a major problem for Europeans; at the same time, it is a concern for more than just a small minority of people.

Status anxiety displays a social gradient

How strong is the social gradient? To answer this question, we subdivided each population into four equally large income groups – so-called quartiles – from high to low; then, the average status anxiety within these income groups is computed. Graph 1 shows the results for six countries exemplarily, whereas the following description refers to all countries. In most countries, status anxiety decreases when one moves from the poorest to the well-off – the expected social gradient, which finds its visual expression in the descending stairway. Germany and England, as well as Norway and Poland, follow this pattern (see graph 1). In contrast, in some southern European countries such as Italy, and in Turkey, the social gradient is less marked. The same is true for many post-

Table 1: Correlation between status anxiety and subjective well–being at the individual level

Life satisfaction		Happiness	
	r		r
Ireland	–.47	Ireland	–.42
Great Britain	–.45	Austria	–.37
Czech Republic	–.40	Great Britain	–.37
Austria	–.40	Czech Republic	–.35
Italy	–.39	Finland	–.35
Average	–.36	Average	–.30
Greece	–.27	Spain	–.21
France	–.26	France	–.21
Denmark	–.26	Greece	–.18
Turkey	–.25	Turkey	–.18
Slovenia	–.15	Slovenia	–.17

The table lists those five countries for which the correlation is the strongest (weakest)
Simple correlations, level of significance for all coefficients p < .0001

Database: EQLS 2007

socialist countries (Poland is an exception to this rule; see graph 1). With an additional regression analysis in which all countries are pooled together, we are digging deeper into the link between household income and status anxiety, while controlling for a host of demographic and socio-economic features. In comparison to the two middle income quartiles, the poor are significantly more concerned about their status, whereas the wealthy are significantly less concerned (results not shown). As such, we can say that status anxiety does involve a social gradient in many countries, with low income resulting in greater levels of anxiety. On the other hand, a high income does not save Europeans entirely from worrying about their status.

Status anxiety lowers life satisfaction

As expected, status anxiety does convert into lower life satisfaction. We found a moderate to strong negative correlation between status anxiety and general life satisfaction in all places, and everywhere it is statistically highly significant. The strength of association ranges between -.47 in Ireland and -.15 in Slovenia, with the average for all countries being -.36 (Table 1). A similar picture arises when one uses happiness instead of life satisfaction as the indicator of subjective well-being. Status anxiety is associated with happiness in a fairly similar range: between -.42 in Ireland and -.17 in Slovenia, with an average of -.30 across countries. These figures suggest that status anxiety belongs to the most unpleasant experiences in life, which cannot be discarded easily. This conclusion is confirmed by regression analyses with life satisfaction or happiness as a dependent variable. Even when we control for a number of demographic and socio-economic characteristics that are known to impact on individual subjective well-being, the negative impact of status anxiety persists (results not shown).

Status anxiety lowest in scandinavia

Let us now look more closely at the extent of status anxiety across Europe (graph 2). The European average of .31 conceals considerable international differences, with Romanians, Bulgarians and Poles being more than twice as much plagued by status anxiety as Swedes and Norwegians. The former have average scores above .4; the latter of below .2. In Western Europe, status anxiety is most widespread in England, France and Belgium (index values around .35) – still much higher than in the Nordic countries. Status anxiety thus varies in Europe by a factor of 2, the same variation as for income inequality. But is there a systematic relationship between inequality and status anxiety, which is the main claim of the SL theory? It is important to recall that the theory claims validity only for "wealthy" countries. But which countries can be considered "wealthy"? Wilkinson and Pickett themselves chose Portugal's income level to separate rich and poor countries,

which has been criticized (Saunders 2010). Ultimately, any income threshold seems arbitrary. To escape this problem, we apply three different thresholds to see how robust the results are:

– "Country set 1" contains all countries which are at least as wealthy as Greece (EUR 19,200). This threshold is derived from the world-system theory: Greece is the least affluent country which continuously belonged to the rich core countries over the last three decades. Using this criterion yields 16 rich countries.

– "Country set 2" (19 rich countries) utilizes Wilkinson and Pickett's threshold, Portugal (EUR 16,700).

– For "country set 3" we use Lithuania's income (at EUR 12,200) as the threshold, which gives us 24 rich countries.

Finally, "all countries" includes all 30 EQLS countries, irrespective of their level of affluence. Macedonia has been excluded due to lacking information on the income distribution.

Status anxiety stronger in unequal societies

Table 2 shows the association between the level of inequality on the one hand and status anxiety on the other for each of the four sets of countries separately. What emerges from the data is a very robust picture: status anxiety is widespread in more unequal places. No matter which income threshold we apply, the pattern is very similar, and it even holds for the mixed bag of rich and poor societies ("all countries"). All correlations are strong and significant (at the 5% level; for "country set 2" it is at the 10% level), with the strongest correlation (.58) emerging for the wealthiest 16 countries ("country set 1").

Does prosperity account more fully for levels of status anxiety? Not for the wealthy societies. In all three sets of rich countries, per capita income and status anxiety are essentially unrelated. In contrast, a strong

Graph 2: Average status anxiety (0–1) in European Countries

Database: EQLS 2007

and highly significant correlation emerges for all 30 countries: When one moves from wealthy to less wealthy societies, status anxiety tends to increase. Recall that "all countries" also includes the post-socialist new member states, which are typically less affluent than most EU15 member states, and in which status anxiety is a bigger problem.

A regression analysis tests the explanatory power of inequality and affluence against each other (Table 3). In our three sets of rich countries, it is clearly inequality and not national income that matters for how afflicted people are with status concerns. In contrast, across all 30 countries it is national income that matters, while inequality does

Table 2: Country-level correlation between inequality/prosperity and status anxiety

	Country Set 1	Country Set 2	Country Set 3	Country Set 4
	Richer than EUR 19,200	Richer than EUR 16,700	Richer than EUR 12,000	All Countries
	r	r	r	r
Inequality (Gini Index)	.58**	.43*	.46**	.40**
Prosperity (GDP p.c. log)	-.14	-.16	-.29	-.57**
N (Countries)	16	19	24	30

GDP = Gross domestic product per capita
Simple correlations, levels of significance: * p < .1; ** p < .05; *** p < .01
Database: EQLS 2007

Table 3: The impact of inequality and prosperity on status anxiety (OLS regressions)

	Country Set 1	Country Set 2	Country Set 3	Country Set 4
	Richer than EUR 19,200	Richer than EUR 16,700	Richer than EUR 12,000	All Countries
	b	b	b	b
Inequality (Gini Index)	0.012**	0.006*	0.005*	0.002
Prosperity (GDP p.c. log)	0.037	-0.004	-0.023	-0.065**
Constant	-0.451	0.168	0.365	0.887***
R^2	0.357	0.182	0.235	0.344
N (Countries)	16	19	24	30

GDP = Gross domestic product per capita

Levels of significance: * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

Database: EQLS 2007

not play a role. These findings suggest that with increasing affluence there is a transition from a mainly poverty-driven status anxiety to inequality-driven status anxiety.

The wealthy benefit from more equality, too

The remaining question is whether equality is good for all, as the SL theory maintains. Alternatively, it is also perfectly possible that equality is benefitting low-income groups in the first place while doing nothing – or even hurting – the high-income group. In order to examine this, I repeated the above regressions; this time not for the entire population, but for each income quartile separately. This analysis is restricted to the wealthiest countries ("country set 1"). In other words, we first compare the status anxiety of the highest income group across the 16 affluent countries, then that of the second highest income group, and so on (results not shown). Irrespective of which income quartile is being considered, one clear message emerges: status anxiety is less of a problem in egalitarian societies, even when the level of prosperity is taken into account. Even individuals with higher incomes benefit emotionally from equality: therefore, equality is good for all.

Let us summarize. First: In Europe, status anxiety is not a rampant concern, but it does exist and is not a marginal problem. Second: Status anxiety involves a social gradient (nearly) everywhere, and is thus typically more widespread among low-income people. Third: Status anxiety is putting a strain on individual's overall well-being. Fourth: In a cross-national perspective, people are less afflicted by status anxiety in more egalitarian societies, at least when one compares affluent societies with one another. Fifth: If one goes beyond the confines of wealthy societies, prosperity emerges as the key determinant of status anxiety levels, not income inequality. Sixth: under the condition of affluence, income equality turns out to be good for all, since it alleviates status anxiety in all income brackets.

Overall, these results lend a lot of support to the SL theory. At the same time, caution is warranted if one is to buy into the theory wholeheartedly. Whereas the geographical reach of the theory is global, our results are confined to Europe. It remains to be seen whether the close association between income inequality and status anxiety is still present once non-European affluent countries are added to the analysis (this concerns Asian countries in particular, which are known to have a greater cultural acceptance of inequality and stratification, as value research on power distance has shown). Finally, we have only investigated half of the theory. We could not touch upon the issue of whether status anxiety is indeed the key for understanding self-destructive and asocial behavior, which then scales up to the social ills which Wilkinson and Pickett eventually seek to explain. Finally, it would be interesting to see how the financial crisis, which is not factored into these data, plays out for Europeans' status anxiety. These issues need to be addressed by future research.

1 For more detailed information on this survey, see http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eqls/2007/

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(The original German version appeared in ISI 47, 2012: 8–11)