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## Mechanisms of Upward Social Mobility

A qualitative analysis of class-specific careers in law and educational science

**Abstract:** Higher education institutions are key to the (re)production and legitimation of social inequalities and have increasingly been studied at the level of students in this respect. However, little research has been devoted to academic careers in the context of class-specific inequalities. The few studies available suggest an underrepresentation of less privileged scholars and focus on explaining the reproduction of these inequalities. In contrast, this paper refers to theories of the social self, bringing into focus an interactionist perspective suitable for explaining social mobility. Drawing on a comparative analysis of 27 autobiographical narrative interviews with German law and education professors of different social origins, the article reveals two mechanisms of upward social mobility. First, through positive evaluations of student and academic performance—and the social comparison processes based on them—the confidence of socially mobile academics in their own abilities grows, and their self-concept changes. Second, social relationships and interactions with authoritative others also modify self-concepts. Both mechanisms are intertwined, in that performance indicators are closely linked to the formation of social relationships, positive evaluation, and encouragement by authoritative others. These findings contribute to scholarship on inequality research in higher education and social mobility research in general by providing comparative insights into class-specific academic careers and the mechanisms of social mobility within academia.

**Keywords:** academia, social inequality, intergenerational mobility, social comparison, social self, academic careers

## Mechanismen der sozialen Aufstiegsmobilität

Eine qualitative Untersuchung klassenspezifischer Karrieremuster in Rechts- und Erziehungswissenschaft

**Zusammenfassung:** Hochschulen sind entscheidend für die (Re-)Produktion und Legitimation sozialer Ungleichheiten und wurden in diesem Zusammenhang vornehmlich mit Blick auf Studierende untersucht. Die Wissenschaftskarriere hinge-

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gen wurde vor dem Hintergrund klassenspezifischer Ungleichheiten bisher kaum erforscht. Die wenigen vorliegenden Studien verweisen auf eine Unterrepräsentation von weniger herkunftsprivilegierten Wissenschaftler:innen und konzentrieren sich in ihrer Erklärung auf die Reproduktion der Ungleichheiten. Dieser Beitrag hingegen bezieht sich auf die Erklärung sozialer Mobilität und stellt dafür mit der Theorie des sozialen Selbst eine interaktionistische Perspektive in den Mittelpunkt. Basierend auf einer vergleichenden Analyse von 27 autobiografisch-narrativen Interviews mit deutschen Rechts- und Erziehungswissenschaftler:innen unterschiedlicher sozialer Herkunft zeigt der Artikel zwei Mechanismen sozialer Aufstiegsmobilität auf. Erstens gewinnen die aufwärtsmobilen Wissenschaftlicher:innen durch positive Bewertungen ihrer studentischen wie akademischen Leistungen, und darauf basierenden sozialen Vergleichsprozesse, an Selbstvertrauen, wodurch sich ihre Selbstkonzepte verändern. Zweitens verändern auch soziale Beziehungen und Interaktionen mit autoritativen Anderen ihre Selbstkonzepte. Dabei sind diese beiden Mechanismen miteinander verwoben. So sind Leistungsindikatoren eng verbunden mit der Konstitution sozialer Beziehungen zu autoritativen Anderen sowie der positiven Bewertung und Förderung durch ebenjene. Die Ergebnisse des Aufsatzes tragen sowohl zur Ungleichheitsforschung im Hochschulbereich als auch zur Forschung über soziale Mobilität im Allgemeinen bei, indem sie vergleichende Einsichten in klassenspezifische Karrieremuster und Mechanismen sozialer Aufstiegsmobilität in der Wissenschaft bieten.

**Stichworte:** Wissenschaft; Wissenschaftskarrieren; soziale Ungleichheit; soziale Mobilität; soziales Selbst; soziale Vergleiche

## Introduction

Universities play a central role in the (re)production and legitimation of social inequalities in “cognitive-cultural capitalism” (Reckwitz 2021: 73). Their growing social importance is reflected not only in the massive increase in the number of students worldwide in recent decades (Marginson 2016); university degrees are also an important social resource for individuals, as they enable access to privileged positions in the labor market and thus commensurate life chances. Against this backdrop, inequality scholars study universities from different perspectives, such as race, class, and gender, or in their intersectionality.

When it comes to class-specific inequalities, students are usually the focus of research, and studies address, for example, unequal access to higher education in general or to so-called elite educational institutions or prestigious degree programs. Nevertheless, while inequality research has devoted much attention to students in recent decades, far less attention has been paid to subsequent academic careers. As such, the extent to which class is relevant to participation in doctoral programs

and the subsequent progression of academic careers has to date been less widely researched.

However, more attention should be devoted to these status trajectories, for several reasons. Firstly, enrolments in doctoral programs globally have increased rapidly, even dramatically in some cases (Shin et al. 2018). This is also the case for Germany, the country of interest for this paper (Jaksztat et al. 2021). A doctorate is not only a prerequisite for an academic career; it also has advantages in other professional fields. The title, once earned, is associated with higher employment rates, incomes, and occupational positions (Bloch et al. 2015; Konsortium Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs 2021; Trennt/Euler 2019). Secondly, academics themselves—and professors especially—are involved in the education of students; by awarding educational degrees, they are directly involved in the (re)production of class-specific inequalities. Socially mobile faculty members might serve as role models for—or recognize and mentor—students from lower-class origins (Binns 2020; Lehmann 2014). Finally, class-specific inequalities challenge the universalistic covenant of science, namely that the recognition of scientific achievements should be independent of individual characteristics such as social origin, gender or race (Merton 1942).

Nevertheless, it is not only studies on postgraduate qualifications such as master's degrees and doctorates are comparatively rare (Wakeling 2018); apart from older studies (for France Bourdieu 1988; for Great Britain Halsey 1995; for Canada Nakhaie/Brym 1999), data on the social origin of faculty were until recently also rather rare. This has begun to change as there has been a recent engagement on academic careers in international research (for the scientific elite in the UK Bukodi et al. 2022; for Finland Helin et al. 2019; for tenure track faculty in the US Morgan et al. 2022). Admittedly, these studies pose difficulties in comparison, as they are based on different conceptualizations of social origin and refer to historically divergent societal settings. But what they have in common is that they indicate an underrepresentation of scholars from lower social classes and focus on the theoretical explanation of the reproduction of class-specific inequalities.

Contrary to the theoretical focus on the reproduction of inequalities, this article aims to explain processes of upward social mobility. It addresses how social origin influences academic careers, focusing especially on the comparatively rare cases of social mobility. These questions are addressed from a comparative perspective, based on 27 autobiographical narrative interviews with German law and education professors of different social origins. By referring to theories of the social self and social comparison theory, I present two mechanisms of upward social mobility. The first is that positive evaluations of student and academic performance—as well as the social comparison processes based on them—increase socially mobile academics' confidence in their abilities, changing their self-concept. The second is that social relationships and interactions with authoritative individuals also transform the self-

concept. These two mechanisms are intertwined insofar as performance indicators are closely related to the constitution of social relationships, positive evaluation, and support by authoritative persons.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly outline the German context with a particular focus on the disciplines studied and the state of the literature on class-specific inequalities in the German higher education system. In a second step, I describe the data my study draws on and how I went about analyzing this data. The theory of the social self underlying the two mechanisms, thus elaborated, is then outlined, before the empirical part is presented. The empirical part is subdivided into three further parts: First, I will focus on performance indicators as a mechanism of upward mobility; second, I refer to authoritative others as another mechanism of social mobility; third, I elaborate on the interconnectedness of both mechanisms. The paper concludes with a summary and contextualization of the results.

## Context and literature on class-specific inequalities in the German higher education system

In Germany, educational inequalities determined by social origin<sup>1</sup> have come under increased scrutiny since the beginning of the 2000s. This was provoked by public discussion following the “PISA shock”, which was primarily concerned with school-level inequalities: After Germany’s poor performance in international comparative studies in the school sector (PISA, IGLU, TIMMS), following which a particularly strong correlation was established between social origin and educational success in Germany, the academic preoccupation with inequalities specifically deriving from differences in social origin increased (Dumont et al. 2014; Otte et al. 2021). Eventually, class-specific inequalities in higher education also became a popular object of research. However, as in international research, German scholars focused primarily on students, and examined career paths within academia much less frequently.

The findings on student-level behavior and academic success are well documented: Studies on class-specific inequalities in higher education show that students of privileged social backgrounds are more likely than peers with the same school grades to enter tertiary education in the first place (Watermann et al. 2014), to complete their study programs (Müller/Schneider 2013), and to opt for prestigious universities (Weiss et al. 2015) and prestigious fields of study (Lörz 2012). They also study abroad more often and for longer (Lörz et al. 2016; Netz/Finger 2016), are less likely to work during their studies, and, if they are employed, are more likely to be in skilled jobs (Staneva 2017). Finally, the more privileged their

1 In this article, the terms ‘class’ and ‘social origin’ are used as functional synonyms to refer to the socioeconomic status of the family of origin. In sociological research, there are a variety of categories for determining a person’s social origin, with parental education level being the most common indicator in the German studies reviewed.

socioeconomic background, the more likely students are to study at universities rather than universities of applied sciences (Reimer/Schindler 2010) and to follow a bachelor's degree with a master's degree (Auspurg/Hinz 2011; Lörz et al. 2015).

While comparatively little is known about postgraduate education and inequalities in subsequent academic careers, this has begun to change in recent years. In Germany, the doctorate is a necessary qualification for—and indeed often seen as the starting point of—an academic career, whether at universities or universities of applied sciences. Aside from the academic track, though, a doctorate is still associated with a higher lifetime income, a higher employment rate, and a higher professional position (Mertens/Röbken 2013; Trennt/Euler 2019). However, the relevance of the doctorate outside the academic field varies between disciplines, including those studied here. The different status of doctorates is reflected in their varying distribution. According to Jaksztat (2014: 293), whose study is based on a survey of university graduates, 31.9 percent of all graduates begin a doctorate in the first five years after graduation. The highest rate of doctorates is in medicine (96 percent), the lowest (8 percent) in education (and social work). For law graduates, it is 38.6 percent (for the doctoral rates of the different disciplines see also Konsortium Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs 2021: 142). In law, the doctorate is regarded as a further professional qualification associated with increasing career (and especially high-income) opportunities (Heineck/Matthes 2012; Mertens/Röbken 2013). In education, by contrast, a doctorate is primarily regarded as an academic qualification. In many professional fields of education, a doctorate is considered insignificant, and sometimes even an obstacle to a career (Rauschenbach et al. 2005).

An increasing number of primarily quantitative studies on the German context shed light on class-specific inequalities in the distribution of doctorates by demonstrating an influence of social origin on the intention to participate in a doctoral program (Lörz/Seipelt 2019), doctoral admissions in general (Bachsleitner et al. 2020; Jaksztat 2014; Jaksztat/Lörz 2018; Radmann et al. 2017) or admissions to different forms of doctorates (de Vogel 2017).

The German academic system has been described as a winner-takes-all market (Berthoin Antal/Rogge 2020), and the career trajectory as an “Up or Out” model (Fitzenberger/Schulze 2014). In this Up or Out model, the doctorate is followed by a further qualification phase on the way to a professorship, in Germany typically habilitation,<sup>2</sup> but equivalent qualification paths have become established in recent

2 The following core principles characterize the specific German *Habilitationsmodell*: *Habilitation*, *Hausberufungsverbot*, *Lehrstuhlprinzip*, *Qualifizierungsstellen* (Berthoin Antal/Rogge 2020: 192). Qualification for a professorship requires a *Habilitation* or a habilitation-equivalent qualification. Postdoctoral researchers can spend up to six years on their habilitation, which concludes with a written examination (monograph or a cumulative work) and an oral defense. Due to the ban on internal appointments (*Hausberufungsverbot*), careers can only be continued by changing universities. Under the traditional and still predominant

years, such as junior professorships, junior research group leaders, and tenure-track professorships (see Kauffeld et al. 2019). Nevertheless, habilitation remains the dominant career path both in education and, to an even greater extent, in law (Gerecht et al. 2020: 140; Zimmer 2018).

The various postdoctoral status trajectories have also been researched only partially. These studies demonstrate the influence of socioeconomic origin on the transition from a doctoral to a postdoctoral position (Lörz/Schindler 2016) or from a postdoctoral position to a professorship (Jungbauer-Gans/Gross 2013; Zimmer 2018). In addition, and complementary to this, the social profile of those recently-established qualification paths (junior group leaders, junior professors) has also been examined (Burkhardt/Nickel 2015; Zimmer 2018), indicating an apparent underrepresentation of scientists with less privileged socioeconomic origins. The same applies to studies of professors in general (Möller 2013), and the scientific elite as a whole (Graf 2016). As it is primarily a professorship that enables permanent academic employment at universities, this article focuses on professors.

All these studies either demonstrate an influence of socioeconomic origin on career success or indicate an apparent underrepresentation of scientists of lower class origin. As such, quantitative research has proven increasingly useful in providing insights into career paths and status groups inside academia, albeit that these studies are primarily concerned with explaining the reproduction of class-specific inequalities and drawing on theories of social reproduction.

In the studies mentioned, references to Boudon's (1974) theory of rational choice and Bourdieu's (1992) theory of cultural reproduction dominate. Boudon explains inequalities in educational attainment with his model of primary and secondary effects. He refers to primary effects, thus describing class-specific disparities in family resources that would contribute to differences in the development of academic competencies and affect educational attainment. Secondary effects are described as the outcome of class-specific decision-making, resulting from different assessments of the rates of return to education, that is, the anticipated costs and the prospects of success associated with an educational path.

In research strands following Bourdieu, unequal capital endowments and habitus-field relations are used to explain (educational) inequalities. Quantitative studies often focus on capital endowments for reasons of operationalization, whereas qualitative studies often focus on habitus. In the competition over educational certificates, actors of higher classes are theorized as benefiting from a greater volume of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) and their habitus.

*Lehrstuhlprinzip*, professors preside over a chair (*Lehrstuhl*) and have budgetary resources with which they can employ staff (Hüther/Krücken 2013; Dobbins 2020). Academic staff is thus formally bound to professors, and the professors control the direction of research and teaching at their chair. Positions below the professorship are usually considered training positions (*Qualifizierungsstellen*).

Habitus is a internalized system of durable dispositions of “schemes of perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu 1984: 100). The homogeneity of the conditions of existence within classes leads to the internalization of comparable dispositional systems, i.e., class habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 80–81). Habitus influences the goals perceived to be desirable and reasonable, but also evinces differing levels of suitability to the requirements of a field e.g., the educational system. In this regard, habitus acquired in the lower classes would correspond less with those of the educational system, leading to lower levels of success and vice versa.

In addition to some of the cited quantitative studies, a number of German qualitative studies also draw on Bourdieu’s theory. Engler (2001) states in her interview study with professors from different social classes that they construct their academic careers free of their social origin. Otherwise, she argues, they would risk breaking with the claim to scientific objectivity and thus the *illusio* of the field. While Engler suggests that socially mobile professors undergo a second socialization in their academic careers, she situates this finding outside her research interest. Keil (2020) draws on Bourdieu and argues, in the context of academic careers, that scholars of more privileged class origin benefit from their familial resources and are better adapted to academia due to their habitual dispositions. These studies may make reference to social reproduction in their explanations, but little is said about upward social mobility.

An exception is the interview study with socially mobile law professors by Böning, Blome, and Möller (2021), which analyzes the professors’ narratives of upward social mobility. They argue that there is a change in biographical narratives over time: While professors of older cohorts ascribe a high relevance to structures of opportunity, it is professors of younger cohorts who emphasize the importance of talent and ambition for successful advancement. However, the analysis of narratives can be understood primarily as an engagement with biographical self-conceptions.

International qualitative research is also increasingly addressing issues of class-specific inequalities among scholars. Although these studies sometimes differ from the German studies in their theoretical references, they are also primarily concerned with questions of the reproduction of inequalities. Analyses of interview data or autobiographies reveal central themes used to explain inequalities. These include the lack of cultural and economic capital in the families of professors raised in working-class families (Haney 2015; Warnock 2016); the way in which negative aspects often accompany academic success, such as the loss of close relationships with (or alienation from) family and friends (Wakeling 2010; Warnock 2016); the stigmatization of US professors from less-privileged classes in academia by their middle-class peers (key terms here being discrimination or microaggressions) (Crew 2021; Lee 2017).

The current literature on class-specific inequalities in higher education focuses primarily on students but increasingly addresses later academic trajectories. The-



oretically, research focuses on the reproduction of socioeconomic class-specific inequalities. Against this backdrop, this article sheds light on the scarcely-researched academic status trajectories, and examines how social origin influences careers. In contrast to theoretical explanations of social reproduction, the focus here is on explaining mobility. What social mechanisms can explain the comparatively rare cases of upward social mobility?

### Methodological and theoretical framework

The organization of the research process for this article is anchored in grounded theory methodology (GTM), which emphasizes the abductive construction of theoretical concepts through iterative data analysis (Strauss 1987; Timmermans/Tavori 2012). GTM purports to generate hypotheses and middle-range theories in close engagement with the empirical material, an approach that is particularly appropriate given the largely unknown phenomenon, i.e., upward social mobility in academia. The research process is openly structured and follows an iterative approach and the associated “theoretical sampling”. In this way, the collection and analysis of data intertwine, as does the construction of theories. Thus, data analysis leads, in engagement with theories and the empirical material, to the development of theoretically relevant criteria, which structure the further data collection and, in turn, drive theoretical development. While the GTM is a methodological framework suitable for organizing the research process, the GT as a method for data analysis reaches its limits when analyzing autobiographical narratives (Ruppel/Mey 2015), which is why the data analysis here is guided by narrative analysis.

### *The social self*

In this article, I will draw on Mead’s interactionist assumptions of a socially mediated self, whereby the self emanates from the dialectical relationship between the “I”, as the impulsive and spontaneous side of the self, and the “Me” as the socialized component of the self (Mead 1934: 173–178). The “Me” is shaped by the interpretation of what others think of us (“reflected appraisal”), but varying relevance is attributed to different interaction partners. Referring to the concept of the significant other, coined by Harry Stack Sullivan (1940) but often attributed to George Herbert Mead (1934), authors distinguish the influence of different interaction partners. The concept of significant others is primarily used to describe and analyze processes of primary socialization, emphasizing the formative power of the internalization of social reality mediated by significant others (Berger/Luckmann 1991: 154).

However, some sociologists building on Mead still argue for the importance of primary socialization but conceptualize its continuing effects less rigorously (Gerth/Mills 1953; Strauss 1977). Gerth and Mills, the authors to whom I refer here, conceptualize the self as continuously changing and as “a reflection of the appraisals



of others as modified by our previously developed self” (Gerth/Mills 1953: 85). The appraisals of significant and especially authoritative others are organized into a pattern in the “generalized other”, which can be understood as the “internalized expectations of self” (Gerth/Mills 1953: 105); it changes “as new appraisals are added to older ones, and older ones are dropped or excluded from awareness” (Gerth/Mills 1953: 98). I follow Gerth and Mills in their definition of significant others as those to whom “the person pays attention and whose appraisals are reflected in his self-appraisals” (Gerth/Mills 1953: 85) and relate this to their notion of authoritative others. In reference to my empirical material, I understand as ‘authoritative others’ those significant others who are particularly important for the constitution of one specific (here: academic) element of the self, as authority is ascribed to them due to their expertise.

While the sociological tradition of social psychology emphasizes the interactional aspects of the self, the psychological emphasizes the complementary ‘internal’ views, including self-evaluation as one dimension of the self. In the context of the theory of the same name (Festinger 1954), social comparison serves an anthropological need to evaluate one’s abilities and opinions and is thus another influential source of shaping the self. Comparing oneself on a given dimension to others reduces uncertainties regarding self-evaluation. In addition to self-evaluation, two other motives are attributed to social comparisons. One motive is self-improvement and is achieved through upward comparisons, and the other is self-enhancement and is, conversely, realized through downward comparisons. Social comparisons are sometimes assumed to be cognitively automatic (Gilbert et al. 1995), but unfamiliar, ambiguous, or unclear situations are thought to evoke explicit comparison processes (Festinger 1954).

### *Data collection*

The paper draws on 27 autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983, 2016) conducted by me between 2017 and 2020 with professors in law and education. Two central arguments favor this form of interviewing: First, academic careers and intergenerational social mobility<sup>3</sup> are long-term processes, and secondly, the interview is characterized by a high degree of openness. Due to the temporal extension of academic careers and upward social mobility, these processes can neither be recorded in the research field nor directly observed. The autobiographical narrative interview, however, offers a possibility to approach them. The interview comprises two phases, beginning with an initial narrative question by the interviewer, initiating the interviewee’s subsequent main narration. In the interviews at hand, I address

3 Regarding social mobility, a distinction is made between intra- and intergenerational mobility (Kalleberg/Mouw 2018). Intragenerational mobility describes mobility between relevant stratification dimensions of the same person over time. Intergenerational mobility refers to mobility between generations, with parents usually used as the reference. In what follows, I refer to social mobility as intergenerational mobility.

the whole life story with the initial narrative questions. In this way, hypothesis-driven data collection is dispensed with, and the respondents' relevance is followed. With this high degree of openness, the interview style is suitable for researching unknown phenomena in an explorative manner. Once the interviewee has finished their main narrative, the second phase continues with follow-up questions, in which I begin by elaborating on the themes of the main narratives. Only then do questions follow on topics that the interviewees themselves did not raise. I conducted the interviews face-to-face in German, then transcribed them completely. Their duration ranges from one to three hours. The transcripts are supplemented by field notes, which include information on the situational background, context, nonverbal cues, and pre- and post-interview discussion (Tessier 2012).

### Sampling

Data were collected using theoretical sampling (Glaser/Strauss 2006) in terms of the characteristics of professors and the field of study. Based on the first interviews with socially mobile law professors, I decided to draw a contrast with those professors of higher social classes, thus reconstructing class-specific patterns of academic career paths using these contrasting cases as a basis.

For the classification of professors' social origins, the article draws on a model used between 1982 and 2009 in the *Sozialerhebung*,<sup>4</sup> which distinguishes four groups of origin (low, middle, upper, high), divided hierarchically according to the parents' professional positions and educational qualifications.<sup>5</sup> This model not only served for a long time to classify the social origin of students in the *Sozialerhebung*, but it also represents the most comprehensive study of the social origin of German professors (Möller 2015). In my study I categorized those originating in the low

4 The *Sozialerhebung* (1951–2016) surveyed students in Germany regarding their social and economic situation about every three years. In 2019 it was combined with the *Studierendensurvey*, EUROSTUDENT and *beeinträchtigt studieren* to form *Studierendenbefragung in Deutschland*. See <https://www.die-studierendenbefragung.de/en/the-student-survey>.

5 The 'low origin' group primarily includes students whose parents are, for example, manual workers or low-skilled employees, or entry-level civil servants without a university degree. In the middle group, the parents are master craftsmen, foremen, employees in mid-level positions, and civil servants without a university degree. The upper group includes, for example, employees and civil servants in higher positions, freelancers, and similar positions with and without a university degree. Finally, the high group of origin is composed mainly of employees with extensive management responsibilities, civil servants of higher service, managers of larger companies, and similar top professional positions with or (rarely) without a university degree (for a precise explication see Middendorff et al. 2009: 546). In 2012 the *Sozialerhebung* switched to a model of educational origin groups, which reduced the operationalization of social origin to the highest educational degrees attained by parents.

or middle groups as cases of upward social mobility, and those from the highest as reproductive cases.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to social origin, I identify three dimensions as particularly relevant in the analysis; they are taken into account in the sampling process: gender, age, and intra-disciplinary affiliation. Even the earliest interviewees addressed the massive underrepresentation of women. While recruiting female professors from higher social classes was not a problem, I was able to interview only one female upwardly mobile law professor. These recruitment issues might be explained first by the already low share of female law professors, which, to date, is only 18 percent (Sacksofsky/Stix 2018), and second, by the fact that female university professors as a whole come from privileged classes significantly more often than male professors (Möller 2015: 257). Table 1 shows in anonymized form the demographic characteristics of the 27 interviewed professors in the combination of social origin and gender on the one hand and social origin and disciplinary affiliation on the other.

**Table 1: Interviewees demographic characteristics (n=27)**

	Gender		Disciplines	
	Female	Male	Law	Education
Reproduction	2	5	5	2
Socially Mobile	6	14	11	9
Total	8	19	16	11

Furthermore, I interviewed professors from different age cohorts, as the interviewees addressed structural opportunities and barriers, such as educational expansion (Mitterle/Stock 2021) and the higher education restructuring process that followed German unification (John 2017), which affected them differently. In doing so, I identified specific opportunities and barriers within disciplines, such as the rise of empirical educational research and the concomitant demise of humanities-based German pedagogy (Zapp/Powell 2016), and, therefore, considered intra-disciplinary differences in the sampling process.

The interviewees were recruited through various strategies: personal and mediated contact, calls via relevant forums and networks, or direct contact based on publicly available biographical information. I ended the sampling when I reached theoretical saturation, i.e., when the collection of further interviews did not reveal any new aspects of the research question (Glaser/Strauss 2006: 61).

Law marked the study's starting point because it includes a very low proportion of socially mobile professors, and it is a discipline with many professors. The size of

6 With regard to people from the 'upper origin' group, one could also speak of upward social mobility when they attain a professorship, albeit a shorter one. However, such cases were not surveyed.

the discipline is significant both for the ease of recruitment of interviewees and the concomitant possibility of anonymization, which could prove difficult in a smaller field. Beginning with law, I sought a maximally contrasting comparison case, which involves establishing conceptual differences and, possibly, the rejection of previous assumptions (Glaser/Strauss 2006: 56).

**Table 2: Socioeconomic profile of professors by disciplines studied based on Möller (2015), in %**

	Low	Middle	Upper	High	Total
Law	2	19	28	51	100
(Special) Education/ Psychology <sup>7</sup>	19	27	26	28	100
All disciplines	11	28	27	34	100

In addition to the social homogeneity of law (see Table 2), two further contrasting criteria were derived from the iterative analysis: The importance of a candidate's academic supervisors and a strict and strongly hierarchizing culture of evaluation. Educational science was chosen as the comparative discipline, which contrasts strongly with regard to the social composition of the professoriate by being one of the more open disciplines for the socially mobile. Also, the individual influence of academic supervisors is less significant in education, and the grading culture is comparatively benevolent. Beyond these differences, one commonality is that both disciplines have many professors (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021: 109–110).

### *Analyzing autobiographical interviews*

My analysis is based on Schütze's (see 1983, 1984, 2016) narrative theory. Following his methodological underpinnings, autobiographical interviewing aims to produce extempore autobiographical narratives, which he defines as unprepared accounts of personal experiences. One of his basic assumptions is that those accounts are structured around elementary communicative schemes; narratives, descriptions, and argumentations (Schütze 2016: 89–90). Narratives deal with personal experiences or specific events, having a chronological order with a beginning and an end. Descriptions recount the social frames in which the narrative is situated, such as recurring activities or social units, and are characterized by their static structure. Argumentations are abstract explanatory systems, consisting

7 Möller reports the data for a conglomerate of educational science, special education, and psychology and thus takes her cue from the Federal Statistical Office. Since 2015, however, educational science and special needs education have been merged. The aggregation of psychology and education is common but might pose a problem for the question of class-specific inequalities. At least among students, the 'low origin' group is underrepresented in psychology whereas the 'high origin' group is overrepresented. In educational science, on the other hand, the 'high origin' group is underrepresented among students—albeit less markedly (Middendorff et al. 2013: 100).

of, e.g., explanations for the course of events and the reasons for one's own actions. In analyzing interviews, Schütze focuses on extempore narratives as, "to a considerable extent, extempore narratives retrieve the actually ongoing experiences during past phases of life" (2014: 267). Argumentations, by contrast, are related to the current perspective of the interviewee, being affected by the interview situation and primarily representing secondary legitimations (Philipps/Mrowczynski 2021; Schütze 1977).

I began the analyses of the interviews by segmenting the main narratives in terms of their structure, whereas interview passages were segmented according to their communicative schemes and their content. I then compared, based on this segmentation, the cases at hand, and identified socioeconomic characteristics specific to the structural composition of the autobiographical main narrative. In conjunction with the structural analysis, I interpreted single narrative segments, occasionally in interpretive groups (Berli 2021), sequentially (Schütze 2008) as well as "microscopically" (Strauss 2004: 173), and then analyzed them from a case-comparative perspective. The segmentation of the extempore narratives enables the embedding or re-embedding of the single narrative segments and their analysis in and to the respective biographical "gestalt" (Schütze 2016: 91). The analysis is based on the fine-grained transcription of the German-language interviews. Only afterward were the interview transcripts translated and edited for presentation purposes.<sup>8</sup>

One of the analyses' central results is the reconstruction of class-specific divergent biographical schemes, which find expression in the structural composition of the main narrative and in specific narrative segments. Biographical schemes "consist of formulaic versions of obligatory or possible lives or parts of life, with some instructions as to how the parts are put together to form whole lives" (Luckmann 1991: 163). They "form the basis for individual projects of life, for the planning, evaluation, and interpretation of daily routines as well as of dramatic decisions and critical thresholds" (Luckmann 1991: 162). These schemes are transmitted in socialization and vary between societies and eras, but also between genders and social classes (Dausien 2018; Luckmann 1991).

The class-specific differences are essentially that the biographical schemes of the upwardly socially mobile respondents are typically oriented toward lower and middle educational qualifications and occupational positions. Their main narratives begin with primary education and describe the respective school and occupational transitions—from lower and upper secondary education and, if applicable, occupational activity—up to university entrance. Only in the process of education and career do their schemes modify, gradually moving vertically to higher education degrees and occupational positions. In contrast, the biographical schemes of the

8 The interview excerpts quoted have been edited for legibility, but the duration of longer pauses is indicated in brackets, e.g., (3s). A loud emphasis of individual syllables or words is highlighted via bold print.

social reproduction cases consist of higher educational degrees and—associated with this—higher occupational positions. Their main narratives only begin with the transition to tertiary education, more specifically the choice of a field of study, and merely imply their earlier school-leaving qualifications. This structural composition of autobiographical narratives of the reproduction cases can be interpreted as an indicator of their class-specific biographical scheme being oriented toward higher education.

In addition to the differences in the structural composition of the main narratives, the divergent class-specific schemes are reflected in the narrative segments. For example, the narrative segments of the upwardly mobile students typically deal explicitly with questions of financing and academic achievements. In the narrative segments on their academic progress, the reproduction cases address the completion of their studies, but do not explicitly address academic achievements (grades) or financing.

In this paper, I focus on the interview passages in which academic trajectories and career decisions were in the foreground—embedded in the context of the life history narratives. I limit the analysis to respondents' academic careers up to the first appointment as a full professor, i.e., the doctoral and postdoctoral phases are in the foreground. The focus here is on, for example, narrative segments about a respondent's studies and the doctoral intentions developed in this context, or, alternatively, on narrative segments about offers they had received for doctoral or habilitation positions. Analyzing these elements, I identify different social mechanisms (McAdam et al. 2001) constitutive for the modification of biographical schemes.

## Mechanisms of upward social mobility in German academia

### *Performance indicators and social comparison as a mechanism of social mobility*

The socially mobile respondents usually refer to various performance indicators in their main narratives. This applies to school grades, to the corresponding transitions (e.g., from primary to secondary school), and to university enrollment, as well as to academic careers. Focusing on academic careers, I distinguish between academic trajectories, the transition to the doctorate and postdoctorate, and the disciplines. Thus, interviewees in education typically highlight different performance indicators in their main narratives than those in law. And in narratives about doctoral entry, they highlight additional and/or different performance indicators than those discussed in the transition to postdoctoral positions. There are hardly any differences between cohorts or genders in the material at hand.

While the main narratives regarding the studies and the subsequent doctorate of the educational professors mostly emphasize their theses and final grades, the narratives of the law professors are dominated by their grades in the state examinations. When

educationalists address the transition to the postdoctorate, there are no explicit references to grades, only references to their formal completion of the doctorate. Instead, they highlight other performance indicators such as third-party funding or publications. The absence of such references to doctoral grades marks a significant difference from legal scholars. When legal scholars talk about their transition to the postdoctorate, they continue to refer (comparatively) to their exam grades—especially the second *Staatsexamen* and their doctoral grades—and often also mention the time taken to complete the doctorate.

To exemplify the biographical relevance of such performance indicators, let me refer to a narrative segment of one upwardly socially mobile educational scholar: S begins this segment with a background description, contextualizing his first state examination, which he passed at a Bavarian university. The “Bavarian conditions”, he argues, have been particularly tough. S continues:

*From the first written exam onwards, I was off to a good start [...] did the first two written exams with a one (1s) in history (1s) and came home and thought: ‘Maybe you can do something after all.’ And then I got a one and a two in German Studies. And even a two in Ancient History, to the amazement of the whole world. Because with (surname professors) four or five, that’s all there was. (S, m, SM, Education)*

The influence of grades on self-concept as well as the comparisons associated with them can be vividly reconstructed in this excerpt. S derives his self-affirmation from his positive grading, as he underlines by recounting his inner monologue (“And came home and thought: Maybe you can do something after all”). However, S not only refers to his grades but also relates his positive performance via two social comparisons that give them additional emphasis. On the one hand, he relates his performance by describing the exams of the first state examination of his federal state as particularly difficult. And on the other hand, S underlines his examination performance (“to the amazement of the whole world”) by comparing it with the other students through reference to his experiential knowledge of the strict grading practice of a specific professor.

The quoted excerpt refers both to a characteristic aspect of the interviewed educational professors, but also contains a distinctive feature. When discussing their entrance into their doctoral programs, the educational professors mainly make reference to specific numbers in isolation (Heintz 2010): They mention either their marks on the verbal grading scale<sup>9</sup> (“my homework and exams during my studies always got such excellent feedback [...] then I did very well in the exam” (R, m, SM, Education); “I got a ‘very good’ on the examination” (W, m, SM, Education) or their results (“I scored a 1.0 in the first examination” (V, m, SM, Education); “a grade average of 1.2” (Z, f, SM, Education)) and relate them mostly directly to the beginning of their doctoral studies. Unlike in the quoted segment from S, educa-

9 The German grading scale ranges between 1.0 as the best grade (equivalent to A+ on the US scale) and 4.0 as the worst grade (equivalent to D on the US scale). An exception to this is the grading scale for lawyers shown below.



tional scholars rarely compare their grades explicitly to other students' grades. Nevertheless, the reference to grades in the form of numbers lends itself naturally to comparisons and the hierarchies that go along with them: Numbers automatically imply relations, since they make no sense on their own (Heintz 2021).

The socially mobile law professors differ from the education professors in that, first, they refer exclusively to their state exams and, concomitantly, second, they characteristically make explicit comparisons. The social comparisons of legal scholars based on the grades of state examinations can be explained by the specifics of juridical performance indicators. These comparative criteria face the comparators as social facts since their relevance is constantly reproduced in law. In educational science, however, there is no comparative infrastructure corresponding to jurisprudence that would enable such social comparisons. Comparative criteria, it could be argued from a sociological perspective, are socially (re)produced.

In order to illustrate these differences by way of example, I will quote three shorter passages from the main narratives of socially mobile law professors:

*Then I wrote the first exam in (state), and the oral exam was in (month and year). I passed the first state examination with 13.4 points. I think that puts me in the top 3 %. (N, m, SM, Law)*

*And that [her first state examination] worked out well – it was the best state examination of the year in (state). (O, f, SM, Law)*

*I don't know if you are familiar with the grading culture of lawyers, we have very strict grades and I got a 'very good' in the first exam, which is very, very rare and the two women [from his study group] both got a 'good', which was also extremely rare. Today it's a bit more common, but back then only about 1 % got a 'good' or slightly more than 1 %, maybe 1,5 %. (J, m, SM, Law)*

The three interviewees have in common that they compare—albeit in different ways—their performance with that of other students. While O describes herself as the best in her year within her federal state without reference to a specific grade, N and J mention their marks and position them within the grade distribution (see table 4). In law, the grades<sup>10</sup> of the state examinations are perceived as an ostensibly objective indicator of performance, as they are strongly differentiated, and their grade point average is visible nationwide (Gaens/Müller-Benedict 2017). The biographical relevance of law exam grades is also a social fact for later law professors, not least in that it structures career options outside academia as well.

10 German legal education is structured as a two-stage model. The first training phase consists of at least four years of university studies, the second of two years of a legal traineeship. Both conclude with examinations covering the entire field of law (see Koriath 2006). Those exams include five to seven written tests and an oral exam lasting four to six hours. The state examination boards comprise mainly lawyers from the civil service (judges, public prosecutors, administrative jurists) and practicing lawyers, with only a small proportion of law professors among the examiners (Schultz et al. 2018: 216–217). The state examination was reformed in 2003, introducing a compulsory university component to the first examination, which accounts for 30 % of the overall grade. Since this university part is better evaluated, the state part is usually considered when evaluating graduates. Most of the professors interviewed, however, completed both exams as state exams.

The ‘fully satisfactory’ represents the entry threshold to the German judiciary and lucrative positions in the large and internationally-oriented law firms (Korioth 2006; Schultz et al. 2018).

**Table 4: Grading scale of law and an exemplary nationwide grade distribution for first and second *Staatsexamen* in 2002 (Bundesamt für Justiz 2003).**

Points	Grade (German)	Literal Translation	1 <sup>st</sup> <i>Staatsexamen</i> (n=15.056)	2 <sup>nd</sup> <i>Staatsexamen</i> (n=12.149)
14.00 – 18.00	<i>Sehr gut</i>	Very good	0.15 %	0.04 %
11.50 – 13.99	<i>Gut</i>	Good	2.67 %	1.72 %
9.00 – 11.49	<i>Vollbefriedigend</i>	Fully satisfactory	12.02 %	13.47 %
6.50 – 8.99	<i>Befriedigend</i>	Satisfactory	26.60 %	36.02 %
4.00 – 6.49	<i>Ausreichend</i>	Sufficient	30.55 %	33.77 %
0.00 – 3.99	<i>Nicht bestanden</i>	Failed	28.02 %	14.97 %

In addition to their strictness and transparency, the grades exhibit a strong geographical and historical constancy and, compared to other disciplines, are not affected by grade inflation (Gaens/Müller-Benedict 2017). Thus, social comparison processes based on these grades enable the interviewees to evaluate their performance in a supposedly objective way. And the relational positioning of one’s own performance indicators within the performance elite enables the modification of the self-concept.

While the socially mobile professors fairly consistently refer to their performance indicators in their main narratives, I will argue that these positive evaluations and comparison are less significant for the self-concepts of the social reproduction cases. In their main narratives, they rarely mention their grades, and when they do, it is mostly implicit (“was very pleasing in terms of the result” (B, m, SR, Law); “was to my satisfaction” (C, m, SR, Law)). Thus, not only are there no concrete references to the grade, which can be found almost invariably in the socially mobile professors’ main narratives, but explicit social comparisons are also entirely absent. However, they, too, must meet these formal requirements; but unlike the socially mobile, they are less likely to develop their biographical ambitions gradually based on the positive evaluation of performance indicators. Instead, their educational and career ambitions usually precede such evaluations, which will be exemplified by an interview passage from a law professor classified as a social reproduction case.

The passage is part of his main narrative and follows on from previous narrative segments on—in chronological order—family history, law studies, studies abroad, doctorate, habilitation, and first appointment. The interviewee ends the narrative extending to the first appointment with a narrative split coda (Schütze 1984: 102) before he continues with the following:

*As I've just told you, I'd studied sociology in parallel to law. It was always clear to me that I would do a doctorate. My father held a doctorate, my grandfather held a doctorate. All my – not all my uncles, but many uncles held a doctorate, my mother holds a doctorate. And I always knew, with law, it's difficult to find a [doctoral position]. You have to have a 'fully satisfactory'. One reason I studied sociology at the same time was so that I could get a PhD in sociology (2s) in a pinch. (B, m, SR, Law)*

The excerpt illustrates the differences between the biographical schemes of different classes of origin in exemplary and contrasting form. B gives audible spoken emphasis to his almost ahistorical orientation toward the doctorate (“**It was always clear to me**”) and explains it by referring to his family history. The fact that so many family members had a doctorate leads to him taking for granted that he, too, will earn a doctorate. This early biographical orientation towards the doctorate is already evident in the choice of the study subject. Knowing that it would be difficult to achieve the ‘fully satisfactory’, he also studied sociology, as he argues, so that he could earn a doctorate in this if necessary. Thus B also refers to the grades of the state examination, but exclusively to the ‘fully satisfactory’ as the minimum requirement for a doctoral position.

This illustrates the major difference in the relevance of performance indicators between social reproduction cases and socially mobile scholars. For the social reproduction cases, performance indicators appear to be relevant primarily insofar as they are the minimum prerequisite for access to doctoral studies. Thus, the early orientation of educational ambitions toward the highest possible educational degree, the doctorate, differs drastically from the gradual modification of the socially mobile, which is based repeatedly on positive evaluations at different academic stages. While the reproduction cases follow career paths that correspond to the biographical schemes of their social origins, there is higher biographical uncertainty for the socially mobile. Their uncertainty, it could be argued with regard to social comparison theory, evokes explicit or implicit—in the reference to grades—comparisons. Thus, the positive evaluations according to performance indicators are relevant to changing academic self-concepts and modifying biographical schemes. However, these performance indicators are not only relevant to the socially mobile themselves, but they also often provide the basis for the constitution of social relationships with their own academic supervisors.

#### *Authoritative others as a mechanism of upward social mobility*

Analyzing the narratives of upwardly socially mobile professors, I reconstructed the biographical relevance of significant and authoritative others (Gerth/Mills 1953) from higher social classes, identifying different groups of people, such as schoolteachers, classmates’ parents, or academic supervisors. Focusing on academic careers, it is the supervising professors who are most relevant, although I distinguish between the various academic stages, between the transition to doctorate and postdoctorate, and between the disciplines. But while the *Lehrstuhlprinzip* assigns professors a key role in academic careers, as they act as “career gatekeepers”

(Hamann/Beljean 2021) and recruit personnel directly, interactions with them are nevertheless of particular relevance for socially mobile scholars, as they bear the potential to modify their self-concepts.

The importance of authoritative others diverges in the present material. I identify minor differences between disciplines and status transitions. In educational science, supervising professors are of particular relevance for the process of transition to the doctorate, although they are sometimes relevant to the transition to postdoctorate as well. In comparison, those who studied law emphasize the interactions with their authoritative others as highly relevant for both transitional periods.

These differences might be explained by the different status of academic supervisors in each discipline, as well as by disciplinary differences in the statuses of the doctorate. Law is a discipline fundamentally characterized by hierarchies. Furthermore, supervising professors—and the corresponding student-professor relationships—are considered essential (Schultz et al. 2018: 347; Schulze-Fielitz 2013). In addition, while a doctorate is regarded as a professional qualification in law, in education it is primarily considered an academic qualification. But when the doctorate is already seen as the beginning of an academic career, the subsequent transition to the postdoc phase may seem biographically more natural.

I will exemplify the relevance of academic supervisors to the pursuit of academic careers using an interview excerpt from the main narrative of a socially mobile professor of education. In her main narrative, she gives an account of her studies and describes, among other things, that she was offered a job as a student assistant in a seminar, which she accepted. She then talks about her upcoming university graduation and an associated decision-making situation. With Schütze, I interpret her depiction of that situation as a “situation or scene of biographical importance, in which there is a peak in the concatenation of events as well as in which the identity change of the narrator as former *dramatis persona* is experienced by her or himself and can be observed by others” (2016: 96). Schütze (1984: 100–102) thus describes those situations as consisting of four elements: first, an announcement of the scenic representation, second, the outline of the initial conditions, third, the execution of the core of the representation, and fourth, the representation of the outcome.

Regarding Z’s decision-making situation, I will focus on citing and interpreting the last two elements and briefly sketch the first two. She announces a scenic representation by stating that “at the end of my studies, there was an interesting situation”. Z then presents the relevant initial conditions for the interviewer and introduces the context of that decision-making situation. She had oriented her studies toward a double diploma to maintain job market opportunities in the business sector and as a teacher. Z thought that her chances in the business sector would increase with the business studies title *Diplomkaufmann*, which required a second diploma thesis, despite the creditability of the seminars she had otherwise completed.

Following this presentation of the initial conditions, she continues with the execution of the core of the representation:

*And at that time, I talked about it with this professor, who I was also working for at the time. And I reflected on what was next, both the time frame and the topic, and that I was considering writing a second diploma thesis. And in that conversation, he asked me whether I wouldn't rather use the time to write a dissertation. Then I began to think about it more seriously, whether that **might** actually be something. Well, before that, sure, I'd thought about it a bit, like whether that would ever even come into consideration or not, because other people also ask you from time to time, don't you want to continue with it. Well, because my studies went very well, I'd finished my main studies with an average of 1.2. And then, of course, you think about it again. But it wasn't really a tangible goal for me – it wasn't really an option for me yet. (Z, f, SM, Education)*

Z depicts a situation in which she was talking to her former supervisor about the decision just presented. She narrates that in this conversation, he suggested she write a dissertation and argues that this made her think seriously about the doctorate. Before this conversation, her good grades and the resulting inquiries and suggestions from others had led her to vaguely consider a doctorate (“sure, I'd thought about it a bit”), albeit “it wasn't really a tangible goal” for her yet. Only her professor's suggestion of writing a dissertation contributed to a “serious” reflection on this option for action.

We can understand him as an authoritative other: The affective relational level with the professor is indicated by Z consulting him as a biographical advisor for her decision making. Simultaneously, his authority is shown in her reference to his status position (“this professor”), which is opposed to the demarcation from the unspecific “other people” and her higher valuation of his evaluation. Not only is there a lack of explicit elaboration on who these others were; it is only the professor's suggestion and the implicit assessment of her academic competencies contained therein which turn the vague notion into an earnest engagement with the idea of a Ph.D. Thus, her supervisor's suggestion of a doctorate led to a modification of her self-concept and thus to a modification of her biographical scheme. It is especially his assessment which she emphasizes in this regard as leading to her decision. Ultimately, though, the influence is cumulative: her good grades, the subsequent suggestions of a doctorate by “other people”, and of course her supervising professor himself.

The detailed rendering of this situation of biographical importance in Z's main narrative suggests the significance of her supervisor's offer. Such an interpretation is in line with the Z's self-theoretical reflection in the concluding and evaluative part of the quotation:

*But then, just with this conversation, I thought about it more seriously and eventually decided to do it. (Z, f, SM, Education)*

Z's main narrative is used here to exemplify the importance of authoritative others in modifying the self-concept of the socially mobile. During social relations and interactions with authoritative others the self-concept of the socially mobile inter-

nalizes the authoritative others' explicit and/or implicit evaluations. The biographical schemes of the socially mobile change through interaction with authoritative others, and they gradually develop academic career ambitions. The constitution of this social relationship is typically based on the performance indicators just outlined.

After describing the pattern for socially mobile professors, I will compare it with that found in the social reproduction cases, and argue that such positive evaluations through authoritative others and their biographical suggestions are less significant for these respondents' self-concepts: With one exception, in the main narratives of the present cases, academic supervisors are seldom ascribed much importance for the respondents' biographical decisions; equally, there are few similar "situations of biographical importance" referring to supervisors in the material. Nevertheless, supervising professors are also crucial to the social reproduction cases as career gatekeepers.

I will describe the social reproduction cases' pattern in the following by drawing on an excerpt from the main narrative of a law professor from that group. The quoted excerpt is taken from his narrative segment about his studies and follows remarks about exam preparation. He then continues:

*And after the first Staatsexamen, which turned out to my satisfaction, I then turned to one of the professors with whom I had taken several seminars. And I approached him with a doctoral topic about [subject] which was not actually within his competence in the narrower sense. I had to expect that he would reject the topic and had thought of alternatives for this case. To my surprise, however, he reacted very generously. He said I should write about the topic that my heart desired – roughly his words. (C, m, SR, Law)*

C describes how he approached a professor he knew from seminars with his doctoral plans after receiving his grades for the first *Staatsexamen*. He does not mention his specific grade in his main narrative, noting merely that the exam "turned out to [his] satisfaction". However, in the follow-up section, he adds that "he was among the best 10 %" in his *Staatsexamen*, which corresponds to the 'fully satisfactory' grade and is also a requirement for admission to doctoral programs in law. That C also had considered alternatives in case the professors rejected his project suggests that his doctoral intention is less dependent on a specific professor.

This illustrates the major difference between the relevance of authoritative others for social reproduction cases and socially mobile scholars. Like C, social reproduction cases tend to pursue doctorate and postdoctoral positions more strongly on their own initiative and exhibit greater self-confidence. They are the ones who approach professors with their doctoral or postdoctoral projects. They, too, attribute an essential function to professors as career gatekeepers for jobs or fellowships, but consider them less significant for the development of biographical projects.

*The interplay between authoritative others and performance indicators*

Although I make an analytical distinction between objective performance indicators and the influence of supervisors as two social mechanisms, they are intimately intertwined. As such, the development of academic career ambitions and the modification of self-concepts among the socially mobile are closely linked both to the positive assessments of performance indicators that are considered to be meritocratic and also to the encouragement and support of academic supervisors. The grades thus referred to by the interviewees are relevant for, first, the changes in their academic self-concept and, second, the constitution of social relations with later academic supervisors. The latter, in turn, are constitutive of the change in the self-concept of the socially mobile as well as being important as career gatekeepers.

With regard to the interplay between performance indicators and authoritative others, differences between disciplines and their status trajectories can also be reconstructed in the material. The professors of educational science emphasize their overall grades and, in particular, their written theses as the starting point of doctoral programs offered by professors; in doing so, they emphasize the compatibility between the doctoral position and the course of studies or written thesis. This applies in a homologous manner—although without the explicit emphasis on doctoral grades—to the subsequent transfer to postdoctoral positions.

Thus, especially as far as doctoral offers are concerned, I identified major differences for the socially mobile in the field of law. In their case, relationships are occasionally constituted anonymously, in that students are approached by professors based on the examination results of the state examination. Professors consider the content of the degree program to be less relevant for doctoral programs. Instead, the exam grade dominates over the compatibility of the subject matter, which could also be explained by the model of the “*Einheitsjurist*” (roughly, “standardized lawyer”) (Korioth 2006), in which only a small amount of subject specialization takes place when studying law. However, concerning postdoctoral transitions, the focus is on direct personal relationships with the academic supervisor or contacts with other professors mediated through the supervisor.<sup>11</sup> The relevant performance indicators are both the state examination grades and, in particular, the doctoral thesis, as graded by the academic supervisor.

I will depict the interconnectedness of performance indicators and authoritative others by using the main narrative of a socially mobile professor of law as an example. The quoted interview passage follows a narrative segment on the transition to doctorate, for which the law professor gives three reasons: First, a confidence in his abilities resulting from good grades in the state law examination; second,

11 In self-observation formats (Häberle 2010; Schulze-Fielitz 2013) in law, as well as in the interview material at hand, so-called ‘teacher-pupil relationships’ are mainly described as long-term social relationships that usually continue beyond the supervision of the doctoral thesis with the habilitation.



experiences of devaluation by colleagues during an internship due to the lack of a doctorate; and third, a doctoral offer from his “personable” (later-to-be) academic supervisor. He then goes on to elaborate on his career path as follows:

*And, yeah, after two years, I was done with the doctorate. Well, it was – (1s) Anyway, I have to say, the second Staatsexamen was ‘good’, too. That is, ‘good’ twice over. Then you are – you’re among the top one percent. So that’s already something of a royal accolade. You know you’ve arrived, then. Then a Ph.D., right, and this one was summa cum laude. And the professor thought it was pretty good [laughs]. And then I even got a prize, yes. (H, m, SR, Law)*

In the interview excerpt, H reports very briefly on his doctoral phase and then evaluates his legal career to date in the context of performance indicators, including the grades of both his *Staatsexamen* and his doctoral thesis (grade, award). This is another example of a comparative positioning through the performance indicators of the *Staatsexamen*. With the “‘good’ twice over”—i.e., a ‘good’ in the first and also the second *Staatsexamen*—one belongs, as he states, to the upper one percent of a graduating cohort. The interviewee emphasizes his excellent performance accordingly, even couching it in metaphorical terms of royalty.

After comparing himself via his exam grades, he mentions his doctoral grade (“summa cum laude”), its distinction (“got a prize”), and emphasizes, going beyond the mention of the grade, the favorable evaluation by his professor. Unlike the exam grades, in law, the doctoral grade represents both a crucial performance indicator and an evaluation by authoritative others. In this respect, one can firstly state an accumulation of positive evaluations, and also an interweaving of performance indicators and evaluations by authoritative others.

Taking these different evaluations as a starting point, in the following section he takes up the structural conditions he was confronted with after completing his doctorate, which I omit here for reasons of anonymity. With his formal qualification and the structural conditions at the time, he argues that he would have had various professional opportunities and even “quite good offers”. Based on those initial conditions, he continues with the core of the representation of a situation of biographical importance (Schütze 2016) that follows.

*Then [my supervisor] came to me and said, “Don’t you want to do your habilitation with me?” And that’s when I first started thinking about it, when I was [in my early 30s]. So, with the completion of the doctorate, I first started seriously considering it: “Yes, maybe you could consider university”. For me, normally, I really have to say, university professors were a long way away for me. For me, they were – That group for me, at that time, not that I want to say now that I thought it was unattainable. But it was not, for me, at all part of my horizon. It wasn’t something where I would have thought: “This is worth considering for you professionally”. I really wouldn’t have thought it possible. I kind of thought like: Nope, a good lawyer then, a lawyer with a doctorate in [field of work] maybe, or something along those lines, or a judge – that’s what I had in mind at first. But a university professor? Wow, they’re always so super educated, and so broadly educated. They know all kinds of things, speak lots of languages. You can just about halfway speak English, you’re just playing at this. Somehow, I thought: “No, you’re just not in that class”. But that’s what [supervisor] – and so I have to say: [Supervisor] was a great encouragement. He talked me out of all the doubts I had right from the start. He said, “You can do it”. (H, m, SR, Law)*

H presents a situation in which his professor offered him habilitation, to his surprise. He recounts that with this offer, he seriously considered, for the first time, a university career (“maybe you could consider university”); he subsequently extensively recapitulates his concerns at the time. The interviewee expresses his concerns in multiple repetitions on a substantial level and emphasizes them through his intonation. For him, university professors were “a **long** way away”; they were not on his “**horizon**”; he “really wouldn’t have thought it possible”, and so on. He contrasts this social distance towards the professorship, first, with his professional perspectives at the time, considering working as a judge or an attorney and, second, by contrasting his reverential portrayal of professors as multilingual universal scholars (“**Wow**, they’re always so super educated, and so broadly educated. They know all kinds of things, speak lots of languages”) with his self-concept. Compared to the professors imagined in this way, he thinks he lacks “class” with his concerns indicating a social-structural dimension of biographical schemes. The concerns thus articulated are not refuted solely by the positive evaluations conveyed through performance indicators. It is the interactions with his academic supervisor which basically modify his biographical scheme. The supervisor eases his concerns by conveying confidence.

However, in addition to changing self-concept by implicitly or explicitly mirroring academic competencies, academic supervisors have another function, as illustrated in the following interview section. He continues:

*And then I remember that he’d written a thesis of 800 pages. Such a huge thing. He spent eight years on it. And [the supervisor’s own supervisor] had really held him to the highest standards. And then I said, “A text like that I – I wouldn’t manage it. It’s too much of a good thing.” Then he said to me: “Whatever you do, don’t make the mistake,” he says, “of planning such a huge thing. It can be much leaner. Take a smaller timeframe. Don’t take me as an example. You’ll have to tackle it differently.” So, yeah, he really **backed me up**. And then, we developed kind of battle plan, too, so, how could it be done in terms of time and so on. And then he told me directly: “Well, the best thing is to start after three years.” So, it’s like, two times three, it’s still almost the same today, with junior professorships, it’s still like that. And habilitation, the whole thing is still six years. So he said: “Well then, three years here with me for now, but in the third year, we’ll try to get a DFG research grant somehow.” And yes, that’s how he did it. I really have to say that I found the right topic. Of course, I looked for it all myself, which ended up really grabbing me. And he went along with it all, didn’t kind of talk me into having reservations, but said: “Go ahead, I have complete trust in you”, and so on. It was important at the time that I had this man as a supporter, who made me feel like he believes in you. (H, m, SR, Law)*

In essence, I differentiate between two functions of authoritative others based on this interview excerpt. The first is the aforementioned modification of biographical schemes through the confirmation of academic competencies and the refutation of concerns. H emphasizes this again with regard to the requirements he anticipated for a possible habilitation thesis, in which his initial orientation was the comprehensive thesis of his academic supervisor.

Regarding the concerns of a habilitation thesis, however, a second function becomes apparent, consisting of H’s supervisor’s assistance in the practical planning and

realization of the habilitation. It includes the conception of the habilitation thesis itself (scope, time planning) and its financing. To finance the six-year postdoctoral phase, his supervisor proposes a combination of a staff position and a DFG research grant,<sup>12</sup> with him taking the role of career gatekeeper (Hamann/Beljean 2021) in filling the staff position and supporting H with the grant's application process.

Concerning the staff position offered by the academic supervisor here, and his assistance in applying for a scholarship, I want to point out another aspect. Due to the *Lehrstuhlprinzip* (Berthoin Antal/Rogge 2020), German professors play a key role in recruiting and promoting young scientists, regardless of their social background. However, the relevance of economic security is emphasized in the interview material primarily by the socially mobile. Thus, with reference to biographical decisions to pursue doctoral or postdoctoral degrees, they mostly note the duration and scope of staff contracts and stress their influence on their decisions. They can rarely fall back on their family's economic capital, whereas parental economic support, at least until the completion of the doctorate, is quite typical among the social reproduction cases.

While social reproduction cases do not address economic considerations in the main narratives, nor refer to their contracts, they do occasionally address financial support in the follow-up section. For example, in a lengthy narrative segment in his follow-up section, B reflects on his social background and states:

*But it was always clear that my parents would finance a doctorate for me. And in the same way, it was always clear to me that I would finance a doctorate for my daughter. And I have the money, so to speak. And that's another advantage when you come from a bourgeois background. (B, m, SR, Law)*

In this respect, academic supervisors not only have a relevance in the modification of self-concept that differs according to class origin. As career gatekeepers, they convey economic security through job offers, which becomes biographically relevant especially for those who have little economic capital.

## Discussion

Academic careers have only been partially considered in the context of the sociology of inequality, and only a few studies deal with class-specific inequalities after the beginning of a doctorate, let alone look at later status trajectories. The few studies of academia point to an underrepresentation of professors from less privileged classes and focus on theoretical explanations. By examining academic careers from a class-specific perspective, this article contributes to and complements this field of research; it not only provides qualitative empirical insights, but also a theoretical

12 DFG refers to the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation), the most important source of third-party funding for German universities (Hüther/Krücken 2018). In this context, the DFG offers various grants programs. It is thus similar to the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the US.

perspective that focuses on intergenerational transformation rather than reproduction.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of 27 autobiographical narrative interviews with German law and education professors from different social origins, I reconstructed *two basic social mechanisms*, which appear to be constitutive for modifying the self-concepts of the socially mobile. First, through *positive evaluations* of student and academic performance—and the *social comparisons processes* based on them—the confidence of the socially mobile professors in their academic abilities may grow, and their self-concepts may change. Second, *social relations and interactions with authoritative others* may be crucial in the modification of the self-concepts of the socially mobile respondents, as they may internalize their explicit and/or implicit evaluations and thus gradually develop academic career ambitions. However analytically differentiated, both mechanisms seem intertwined. The performance indicators seem relevant for the change in academic self-concepts and, consequently, the constitution of social relations with later academic supervisors. Academic supervisors, in turn, seem crucial in changing the self-concepts by evaluating the socially mobile professors' performances and mirroring academic competencies, and they seem relevant as career gatekeepers.

This contrasts with the social reproduction cases, for whom performance indicators—and the commensurate related social comparisons—and academic supervisors seem less relevant in terms of their self-concepts. Rather, for them, performance indicators appear to represent primarily formal entry requirements, from which less significance is derived for evaluating their academic competencies. The same applies to academic supervisors, who seem similarly relevant for the social reproduction cases as career gatekeepers, but less significant in modifying their self-concepts. Instead, these respondents tend to be the ones who approach professors with their doctoral or postdoctoral projects, and thus pursue academic careers more strongly on their own initiative and display greater self-confidence.

However, this study has its limitations concerning the methodological perspective and the scope of the results. The autobiographical interview allows us to focus primarily on the perspective of the interviewees. Structural opportunities or barriers can therefore only be considered to a limited extent. Moreover, this method does not enable us to adequately investigate either the evaluations of career gatekeepers or the reciprocity of building social relations as authoritative others with them. Regarding the constitution of social relations with professors, individual studies point to an indirect class-specific structuring of recruitment criteria through habitus, for example, among doctoral students (Kahlert 2016). With respect to the significant performance indicators, one of the questions that arises is what influence social origin has on the performance evaluation. While this has been researched for social origin's influence on teachers' assessment of pupils (Lorenz et al. 2016; Tobisch/Dresel 2017), for gender inequalities in the aforementioned

state law examination (Glöckner et al. 2017) or academia (Nielsen 2018; Rivera/Tilcsik 2019), such insights are lacking for social origin and academic careers. Consequently, one might rightfully question, for example, the extent to which ascriptive characteristics influence the assessment and recruitment of young scholars and the related biographical influences upon an academic career by authoritative others, as well as the appointment procedures that ultimately determine professional success.

Further limitations concern the scope of the results, especially in the light of disciplinary and national contexts. The study is limited to two disciplines, which could limit the scope of the results. For example: In law, but also in educational science, less importance is attributed to collaborative research in large teams than it is in natural science work contexts (Kagan 2009: 101). Does this reduce the relevance of authoritative others for the modification of biographical schemes? Furthermore, the German case has some peculiarities due to its prevailing *Lehrstuhlprinzip* (faculty chair principle) and the associated staff structure, which it shares with other countries where faculty chairs wield considerable influence (Dobbins 2020). In these cases, the career path to professorship requires many years of temporary and insecure employment with a high degree of dependence on the chair. The chairs' pronounced influence suggests that they are crucial as authoritative others and career gatekeepers, but this might differ in departmental academic systems. Regarding performance indicators perceived as significant, differences may arise from those contexts in which there is an established strong hierarchization between universities (for the US see Beyer 2021), and the associated differences shape self-concepts. The German system of higher education, and science in general, has been characterized by a low degree of hierarchization between universities, although this could be in the process of change due to excellence initiatives (Hartmann 2010).

Furthermore, quantitative studies dealing with class-specific inequalities in academic careers, especially in the later career phases, would be desirable. Such studies could also draw—with the intention of testing—on the assumptions derived from this study. Thereby, it would seem less problematic to look at performance indicators, even if their disciplinary specificities ought still to be considered. Operationalizing the concept of authoritative others seems to be more challenging.

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