

Other people's backgrounds shape their social position, but I worked hard for mine—the paradox in how we view status

Joe Greenwood-Hau, *The Conversation*, 8 January 2026

The concept of “hard work v privilege”, and what either one says about someone’s social status, is an important one.

Politicians regularly draw dividing lines between “hardworking families” and those receiving “handouts”.
5 Others distinguish between those whose wealth increases while they sleep, and small business owners who work hard for their incomes.

All these points stress the difference between people who have earned their social positions and those who supposedly enjoy “unearned” advantages. In each case, hard work is seen as a good reason to receive rewards, while being gifted them—due to birth, systemic advantage or the “generosity” of the state—is viewed less positively.

10 So common is this view, that people are often uncomfortable recognising how their backgrounds have helped them in their own lives. They also respond negatively when they feel that their statuses are under threat. This can lead to support for radical political parties as a way to protect their social positions, especially where they feel that others are being unfairly advantaged.

15 As I show in my new book, people often have different explanations for the statuses of others than for their own status. While they take credit for their own social status on the basis of hard work, they often attribute other people’s statuses to their backgrounds.

In a survey of 1,405 British adults, I asked people to rank a list of brief explanations for their own social positions, including “hard work” and “background” (left open to respondents’ interpretations).

20 Fifty per cent of them ranked “hard work” as the most important reason, but 7% said it had no part to play. At the same time, 18% of people ranked their “background” as the most important reason for their social position, while a similar percentage said it had no part to play.

25 I also asked people to rank the same explanations in relation to differences in social positions more generally. In this case, 25% ranked “hard work” as the most important explanation, but 38% say that it has no part to play. Turning to “background,” 41% ranked it as the most important explanation for differences in social position, while fewer than 27% say it has no part to play.

Taken together, we see that twice as many people ranked “hard work” as the most important reason for their own position, than for differences in social position more generally. By contrast, when considering “background,” twice as many people ranked it as the most important reason for general differences in social position than for their own social position.

30 These stark differences show the need to measure people’s explanations for their own status separately from their explanations for status in society more widely.

People are right to recognise the role of structural factors in driving social inequality in general. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that factors such as family type, access to high-quality education and disability affect poverty rates and inequality.

35 Social mobility is shaped by your parents’ socioeconomic background. The gender pay gap is slowly declining, but persists. And, while the story varies across different ethnic groups, ethnic inequalities also continue to be important.

40 But despite the continued importance of structural drivers of inequality, my research suggests that people seek to emphasise a positive story about how they have achieved their own social positions. They appear to be more comfortable recognising the workings of privilege—both as it elevates some and marginalises others—in society than in their own lives.

This is also reflected in how people talk about their statuses. In interviews, when asked to describe their social position, research participants sought to emphasise that they do not have it too easy. Even people who recognised that they are relatively fortunate often qualified the observation:

45

- “I’ve always been reasonably well off without being, you know, in the, kind of, super tax bracket.”
- “We’re not filthy rich, but it’s not too much of a struggle.”
- “[I had a] solid middle-class upbringing. Not massively wealthy but certainly by no means struggling.”

There is, then, a deep unease with recognising our own privilege, both in terms of the status that we hold and how we gained it. This does not, however, mean that everyone who thinks they worked hard for their position 50 refuses to recognise that unearned privilege exists. It’s just that we are more likely to do it in relation to others, and to save ourselves the emotional discomfort of acknowledging our own advantage or disadvantage.