

Preface

Our parents' income, the education they afford us, the values they teach us and the people we meet as children, in short: our socioeconomic background, influences the way we think and decide as adults. By implication, socioeconomic background will influence the way in which even top managers and other organizational leaders see the world and act accordingly. Perhaps this is a truism. At any rate, management researchers have hitherto not had much to say about the importance of socioeconomic background for managerial decisions and economic outcomes. Topics such as the importance of class for organizations and the reproduction of inequality are usually discussed left of the mainstream, in so-called "critical management studies".

Things have begun to change since the start of the lingering crisis in 2008. Many observers feel that the crisis has dramatically exacerbated preexisting inequalities in income, wealth, and opportunities. Others have identified as the reason for the crisis a widespread misconduct among managers and other command post holders, i.e. among a small, socially closed elite. If on the one hand a failing social elite is at least partly responsible for the most severe economic crisis since 1929, and on the other hand management scholars are silent on the elite members' social background, then – as some argue – this points to a crisis also of management research as a discipline.

Yanick Kemayou seeks to make good this sin of omission and argues for a reintegration of socioeconomic background into management research. Managers' class roots and their experience when growing up, he argues, should be taken into account in order to understand top management decisions. More specifically, Yanick Kemayou explores if and how socioeconomic background influences important attitudes which are likely to shape top-management decisions, namely risk propensity, sense of control, and fairness perceptions. He unpacks the rather abstract concept of socioeconomic background by focusing not only on the class origin of leaders but also on key experiences during their lives. It does make a difference for their attitudes whether leaders are climbers (their parents were not among the organizational leaders) or not; whether climbers have received support to advance in their education and career; and whether reproduced leaders (their parents were already among the organizational leaders) experience contact with people of the "lower" classes.

There is so much to praise in this dissertation. The theory ingeniously combines management research, psychology, and sociology. Among other things, it rediscovers Max Weber's argument of self-legitimization to explain why different groups of leaders and non-leaders differ in their sense of control. The hypotheses are far from trivial. The easy ones Yanick Kemayou notes in passing. (Easy hypotheses are the finding that leaders differ in their attitudes from other people, and that social climbers differ from the reproduced leaders.) The identification of constructs in an existing dataset, the German Socio-economic Panel, can become klug. But Yanick Kemayou succeeds elegantly by distinguishing in the data the four groups of leaders whose key experiences in their lives are likely to produce differing attitudes. He also knows his methods and how to illustrate effect sizes.

It was a pleasure to supervise Yanick Kemayou's first legs of his scientific journey. At first I could not believe that social background really is so seldom discussed and measured in management research. But Yanick Kemayou convinced me. Essentially, Yanick Kemayou's dissertation makes the convincing case for a new, socially sensitive micro-foundation of management strategy. This is a formidable but timely research program.

Prof. Dr. Martin Schneider

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More Class in Management Research

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