

# Conspicuous Mobility: The Status Dimensions of the Global Passport Hierarchy

By  
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The world's passports are not equal. Travelers from rich countries enjoy extensive travel freedom across the globe, whereas citizens of less developed nations are subject to stringent visa controls. This article examines this global hierarchy from a social cognition perspective, highlighting the status competition around international travel. It analyzes interviews with ninety-eight persons in Serbia and Israel who have acquired a second passport from a European Union country. The interviews illustrate how a social cognition perspective can shed new light on international mobility and global inequality: the analysis suggests that passengers continuously monitored how they and others were treated by border control authorities, perceiving different treatment as indicative of status. Respondents experienced shame when the treatment they received fell short of their expected standards and felt pleasure and pride when treated better than comparable others. Respondents tended to compare their travel freedom to that enjoyed by citizens of nations that they perceived as culturally similar.

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**T**he world's passports are not equal. Citizens of rich countries enjoy extensive travel freedom around the globe, while people from less developed countries must undergo strict visa procedures before traveling abroad, whether for short trips or long-term migration. This international regime of visa restrictions is mostly shaped by the efforts of rich countries to prevent unwanted immigration. While scholars have explored the formal structure of the global hierarchy of travel freedom (Bigo and Guild

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2005; Neumayer 2006; Mau et al. 2015; Harpaz 2019), we still know little about its subjective dimensions (see, however, Jansen 2009; Sarabia 2015). Given the rapid growth in international travel in recent decades, crossing borders has become an increasingly common human experience and a key context in which people come face to face with global inequality. The wish for greater travel freedom drives demand for immigration and dual citizenship (Kim 2018; Harpaz 2019; Knott 2019; Altan-Olcay and Balta 2021; Surak 2021); and questions of visa-free access play a significant role in international relations, for example, between Turkey and the European Union (EU) (Schengen Visa Info 2021). There is, therefore, a growing need to understand international travel freedom as it manifests in individuals' subjective experience.

This article draws on the literature on social cognition and competition to analyze the hierarchy of international travel freedom from individuals' point of view (Fiske 2011; Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019). I argue that passengers often experience gaps in travel freedom as differences in social status. The easy, unhindered movement provided by the passports of rich countries is experienced as indicating high status, while constraints on mobility produce a sense of low status. Passengers closely monitor the treatment they receive from border control authorities and use these observations to form status judgments (cf. Goffman 1967).

To test this argument, I analyzed ninety-eight in-depth interviews with Israelis and Serbians who have acquired a second passport from an EU country. These dual-citizen respondents could compare the experience of travel with EU and non-EU passports. The analysis demonstrated three main points. First, respondents closely monitored all aspects of border control procedures, comparing the level of bureaucratic deference that they received to that accorded to others. Second, nondeferential treatment, such as long waiting times and intrusive questioning, led to feelings of shame and humiliation; meanwhile, better bureaucratic treatment led to feelings of pleasure and high status. Third, respondents evaluated their travel freedom relative to others whom they perceived as similar. Serbians evaluated the Serbian passport in relation to the passports of neighboring Central European nations and found it lacking. They sought EU passports to overcome this perceived disadvantage. Israelis did not compare their travel freedom to other nationalities. Instead, they focused on gaining a conspicuous mobility advantage over other Israelis.

The article's findings contribute to the study of migration by highlighting the interaction of status and mobility. Immigration control policies produce status hierarchies as an unintended consequence, and these in turn motivate people to seek higher-status citizenship. The article also contributes to the literature on social cognition by extending its insights to a new domain: status distinctions based on travel freedom. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on globalization by exploring the subjective status dimensions of global citizenship-based inequality. Overall, the article highlights the usefulness of combining institutional and cognitive approaches in the attempt to understand mobility and migration (Fiske and Vari-Lavoisier, this volume).

## A Global Hierarchy of Travel Freedom

Different passports provide very different levels of global travel freedom (Mau, Laube, and Zaun 2015; Harpaz 2019). Persons who carry passports from the United States, Canada, Germany, or other rich and democratic countries may visit between 180 and 190 visa-free destinations without need for a visa; citizens of Russia, Turkey, or Colombia have visa-free access to about 110 to 130 destinations; while Egyptians, Iranians or Indians may enter only 40 to 60 destinations visa free (Henley and Partners Visa Restrictions Index [HVRI] 2020).

The travel freedom accorded to citizens of a particular country is closely correlated with its level of development, democracy, and security (Harpaz 2019). This reflects the role of visa requirements as a key mechanism of immigration control (Bigo and Guild 2005; Neumayer 2006). Visas not only prevent unwanted potential immigrants from entering a country's territory, they also signal to passengers from less developed countries that they are not welcome (Gaibazzi 2014).<sup>1</sup> Thus, high travel freedom is reserved for those who already enjoy high citizenship value and presumably have little motivation to emigrate.

Travelers with lower-value passports not only face ubiquitous visa requirements. They also face costlier and more intrusive visa application procedures compared to passengers from higher-tier countries (Kim 2018; Recchi et al. 2020). Here, for example, is the list of documents that citizens of Gambia must provide when applying for a Schengen (EU) visa (drawn from Gaibazzi 2014, 49): (1) passport; (2) travel health insurance; (3) bank statements and pay slips; (4) hotel reservations; (5) return air tickets; (6) a local work contract, letter from employer, or marriage certificate; and (7) invitation letters. This is a typical list of requirements for passengers with lower-value passports seeking entry to the EU or the United States.

Disparities in travel freedom are also manifested at airports and other ports of entry. Passengers with lower-value passports face stricter questioning and are more likely to be denied entry or selected for additional inspection (Neumayer 2006; Salter 2006; Shilon and Shamir 2016). In many countries, border crossings have separate lines for different categories of passengers. For example, at EU ports of entry, citizens of any EU country (as well as Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland) use a special line where they face minimal scrutiny and their passports are not stamped. Meanwhile, non-EU passengers must stand in a separate line, where their documents, intentions, finances, and backgrounds are scrutinized with greater care.

This discussion shows that a lower-value passport imposes a consolidated disadvantage on travel freedom, which manifests across different domains: number of visa-free destinations, visa procedures, and border admission procedures. International travel exposes passengers to differential treatment on the basis of their citizenship.

### International Travel Freedom: A Status Perspective

Scholars of globalization have long argued that in an interconnected world, mobility is a crucial axis of stratification (Bauman 1998; Shamir 2005). Below, I

flesh out this claim by analyzing international travel as a site of status competition. I treat status as perceived competence (Fiske 2011). In this context, high travel freedom (i.e., high competence) equals high status, and restricted mobility is associated with low status.

Existing studies have shown that travelers attach status implications to differences in travel competence associated with experience, ethnicity, or spending power. Frequent air travelers show their high status by moving through the airport with speed, confidence, and ease (Shilon and Shamir 2016). Passengers who are ethnically profiled for extra questioning experience the different treatment as humiliating (Hasisi, Margalioth, and Orgad 2012). Airlines conspicuously divide passengers into travel classes to encourage status competition that may then lead to more spending (Schwartz 2020). These examples illustrate that travel provides fertile soil for status competition, leading us to expect that citizenship-based differences in travel freedom would also produce status stratification.

The number of visa-free travel options discussed in the previous section is a good indicator of travel freedom as competence. This measure, however, is too removed from lived experience to be directly experienced as status. Typically, people are not aware of the precise number of visa-free destinations that their passport provides or its relative standing compared to other passports. Therefore, I focus on another, closely correlated, indicator of travel freedom: the treatment that passengers receive from border control authorities. This is an aspect of citizenship-based travel freedom that manifests itself directly in passengers' life experience.

To analyze the status dimensions of treatment at the border, I draw on Erving Goffman's (1967) concept of deference. Deference is a behavior that signals respect. It entails avoiding certain actions (e.g., touching another person's belongings, asking intrusive personal questions) while treating others as obligatory (e.g., using certain forms of address). Asymmetric deference is at the core of status differences: the more deference a person receives, the higher their status, and vice versa (Goffman 1967, 56–76; see R. Collins 2004; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012).

The concept of deference is applicable to the bureaucratic mobility controls that passengers encounter when they apply for a visa, move through the airport, respond to questioning, or have their passport and luggage checked. A foreigner seeking to enter a country may be required to give complete, one-sided deference (Salter 2006). In most cases, however, border agents offer a degree of reciprocal deference to passengers, according some recognition to their dignity and privacy (Shilon and Shamir 2016). This kind of courteous recognition—I will refer to it as *bureaucratic deference*—is given selectively, on the basis of passengers' passports (and, sometimes, their race, ethnicity, or wealth).

I expect to find four key elements that determine passengers' experience of bureaucratic deference: (1) duration of the procedure (in particular, waiting time), (2) intrusiveness with regard to the applicant's personal life and belongings, (3) assignment to high-status or low-status spaces, and (4) certainty of admission.

The degree of bureaucratic deference a passenger receives determines the experience of high or low status. An ideal-typical high-status traveler will use a fast-moving specialized, high-status line (e.g., the EU-citizens line or, in the United States, Global Entry) and will gain visa-free admission by flashing her or his passport in front of a digital sensor. At the opposite end, we would find a low-status passenger who has had to obtain a visa in her or his country of origin, then faces a long wait at a low-status line at the airport, followed by an intrusive interview with a high likelihood of being denied entry.

The level of travel freedom provided by a passport—the person's perceived mastery and competence—manifests in passengers' lived experience as bureaucratic deference. From this perspective, a low-value passport operates as stigma, or a public sign of lower social value (Goffman 1963). A high-value passport, meanwhile, ensures bureaucratic deference and, with it, high status. Paraphrasing Thorstein Veblen (1899/1918), such a passport would provide opportunities for conspicuous mobility: a public, status-elevating display of high competence.

## Cognitive Patterns of Status Competition

To analyze travel freedom as status, I draw on the psychological literature that has explored the affective and cognitive dimensions of status competition. I focus on three dimensions.

### *Status monitoring*

All forms of social competition involve individuals' ascribing value to some trait or ability and monitoring it while comparing themselves to others (Festinger 1954). The categorization of others as possessing high or low competence—corresponding with high or low status—is a fundamental and automatic cognitive process (Cuddy et al. 2009; Fiske 2011). Furthermore, people are highly attentive to differences in treatment and performance that may indicate differences in status, from facial expressions to the number of pens on one's desk (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015, 10–11; Ridgeway 2019, 50–61). I, therefore, expect passengers to be highly attentive to the levels of bureaucratic deference that they and others receive while traveling.

### *Pride and shame*

Pride and shame have been described as “components of a culturally-universal system for managing one's hierarchical status” (Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019, 470). Pride is the pleasurable feeling that accompanies increases in status, whereas shame is the unpleasant acknowledgement of a decline in status (Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019; see Sznycer et al. 2018). The positive or negative valence of these emotions helps to explain the prevalence of status-seeking behavior: an experience of high status is emotionally rewarding, whereas low status is painful (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015). I expect

passengers to experience status-oriented emotions of shame (or pain) and pride (or pleasure) in response to perceived differences in bureaucratic deference.

### *Selective comparisons*

When evaluating their own ability or performance, people focus on comparisons with others whom they perceive as similar in relevant attributes and therefore comparable (Festinger 1954). A middle-aged clerk who jogs once a week would not compare her or his best time to an Olympic medalist. Psychologists have studied a range of factors that affect the selection of relevant others for comparison, including group membership, familiarity, and past competitions (Garcia, Reese, and Tor 2020). A particularly important distinction is between downward and upward comparisons, meaning comparisons with lower-performing or higher-performing others. The pleasant feeling that accompanies downward comparison (“I did better than her”) makes it easy to understand why people would engage in such comparison (Wheeler and Miyake 1992; Suls, Martin, and Wheeler 2002). Upward comparison (“she did better than me”) is painful, yet very common (Garcia, Reese, and Tor 2020). Comparison itself is an assertion of similarity, meaning that upward comparison is a way of counting oneself “among the better ones” (R. L. Collins 2000). In other words, selecting a standard for comparison is an identity statement in itself, independent of whether the comparison turns out to be an upward or downward comparison.

International travel freedom is predicated on citizenship and thus closely tied to national identity. National identities include assumptions about a nation’s membership in a cultural (or civilizational) sphere, such as the West, Europe, or Latin America. Moreover, national conceptions of cultural membership are often aspirational, in the sense of self-attribution to high-status categories. For example, elites and publics in countries such as Poland or Czechia tend to identify as European and eschew the less prestigious label “Eastern European” (Sztompka 2004). I hypothesize that people would selectively compare their travel freedom with other nationalities from the same cultural sphere, as defined by national schemas, and that upward comparisons would be common.

## Study Cases: Strategic EU Citizens Abroad

To explore the status experiences associated with international travel, I analyzed interviews with people in Israel and Serbia who had obtained EU dual citizenship. These cases form part of a global phenomenon whereby citizens of countries outside the EU and North America strategically acquire a second citizenship from EU countries on the basis of ancestry or ethnicity (Harpaz 2015, 2019). Typically, the second citizenship operates as “compensatory citizenship”: it provides practical benefits that the primary citizenship lacks. These benefits may include an insurance policy against political or economic crises, a path to broader opportunities for work and education, and a high-value passport with extensive travel freedom (Harpaz 2019; see Knott 2019; Mateos 2019).

The first study case includes Serbian citizens who have acquired dual citizenship from Hungary, an EU member country. More than a million Hungarian speakers in Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine have taken up Hungarian citizenship since 2011, including more than 180,000 citizens of Serbia (Harpaz 2019). Most dual citizens belong to the country's Hungarian minority, but some are ethnic Serbs who have painstakingly studied the Hungarian language. Applications were driven by a mix of instrumental motivations (access to the EU) and sentimental ties to Hungary (Pogonyi 2017; Harpaz 2019). The Serbian passport is ranked thirty-seventh in the world, with 134 visa-free destinations. The Hungarian passport ranks tenth, with 182 visa-free destinations (HVRI 2020).

The second case pertains to Israelis who have acquired citizenship from their parents' or grandparents' European origin countries. Since 2000, more than eighty-five thousand Israelis have secured ancestry-based dual citizenship from Germany, Poland, Romania, Hungary, and other EU countries. Thousands of other Israelis have obtained passports from Spain and Portugal, which offer citizenship to Sephardic Jews (Harpaz 2013, 2019). The Israeli passport is ranked twenty-third in the world, with 160 visa-free destinations (HVRI 2020).

## Data and Methods

I use data from interviews with forty-eight Serbians who had acquired or applied for Hungarian citizenship and fifty Israelis who had acquired or applied for citizenship from EU countries.<sup>2</sup> Interviews in Serbia were conducted in 2014. Interviews in Israel were conducted in 2008 to 2009 and 2015. I recruited respondents through snowball sampling, since random selection was impossible when trying to locate persons with dual citizenship. Interviews were 75 to 150 minutes long and were conducted by me in Hebrew, Serbian, or English. The interviews included questions about respondents' motives, the application procedure, the uses of citizenship, and their identity and views on citizenship. I coded and analyzed the interviews using predefined themes as well as themes that emerged inductively from the material. Respondents' names were changed to maintain anonymity.

People who have acquired a second passport from an EU country provide a unique opportunity for studying international travel freedom because they can compare the experiences of travel with two different passports. This sampling method creates the potential for self-selection bias. Individuals who attach high status significance to international travel are arguably more likely to have acquired compensatory EU citizenship. The recruitment of respondents on the basis of a characteristic that is correlated with the dependent variable leads to a risk of overstating the effect. This is not necessarily problematic, however, since the main purpose of this study is to broach an overlooked phenomenon and generate suggestive findings that can lead to further systematic examination. To that end, qualitative studies with a nonrandom sample are highly suitable (see Portes 2001).

The interview-based methodology used here differs from the experimental methods that psychological studies ordinarily use. This methodology implies three limitations. First, nonrandom respondent selection means that there are

intervening factors for which I cannot control. Second, interview-based studies rely on post hoc reconstructions that may differ from actual experience and behavior. Third, the narrative data cannot be operationalized in a quantitative manner. On the other hand, using interviews allows me to examine the dynamics of status competition as they unfold in a real-life setting rather than in an isolated lab. Moreover, the use of qualitative data leads to a richer and fine-grained analysis of the subjective dimensions of status competition.

## Analysis

The material shows evidence of three patterns associated with status competition: monitoring of travel freedom, status-oriented emotions, and selective comparisons. Since monitoring differences is inseparable from the emotional reaction to them, I discuss these two aspects together. I then discuss the logic of selective comparisons.

### *Travel freedom as a source of pride and shame*

Respondents in Serbia typically complained of the low travel freedom provided by the Serbian passport and described it as a source of shame. At the time that I conducted interviews in Serbia (2014), the Serbian passport afforded visa-free access to the EU's Schengen zone. However, many respondents made references to the period that lasted from the early 1990s until December 2009, when Serbians were required to obtain a visa before they could visit European Union countries (Jansen 2009).

Gabriela, a 28-year-old government employee, obtained her Hungarian citizenship in 2013. When explaining her decision to apply for citizenship, she recounted the following episode: "I visited the Czech Republic in 2008 and I had to wait for a whole day in front of the embassy [to get a visa]. It was so humiliating. . . . You had to prove that you had money, say where you will sleep, and pay up front. And then—maybe you'll get [the visa], maybe you won't."

The quotation illustrates how a seemingly mundane experience of applying for a visa is charged with powerful, status-oriented emotion (cf. Gaibazzi 2014; Sarabia 2015; Kim 2018). Gabriela details four humiliating aspects of the procedure: waiting "in front of the embassy" (low-status, exposed space), "for a whole day" (long duration), responding to a set of intrusive questions, and having no certainty of the outcome. These elements convey one-sided deference that is associated with low status, evoking feelings of shame and humiliation. The quote was typical: numerous respondents described pre-2009 visa applications as a humiliating experience, and many respondents applied for Hungarian passports to improve their travel freedom. In 2013, the EU threatened to restore the visa requirement for Serbian citizens—and the number of applications for Hungarian citizenship immediately surged (Harpaz 2019).

Nowadays, Serbian citizens may enter EU countries visa free, but they are still likely to be questioned at the border about their plans and financial ability, and



their luggage is often checked. Respondents who obtained a Hungarian passport drew a sharp contrast between their travel experiences with the two passports. Bojan, a 34-year-old graduate student, said,

If you come to the EU with a Serbian passport, you have to show them how much money you have, where you're going and for how long. After I got Hungarian citizenship, they don't inspect me anymore. I just go. . . . With the Hungarian passport, it's great—you can go anywhere and nobody asks you any questions.

In this quote, intrusive questioning at the border is experienced as a sign of the low status of Serbians in Europe. Being exempted from this mandatory deference to authorities—"nobody asks you any questions"—makes the subject feel "great." Numerous other respondents spoke of the pleasure they felt when using their Hungarian passports. Maja, a 26-year-old student, said that travel with her Hungarian passport "felt really different. You don't have to wait to get stamped. You don't feel inferior because [you are barred from] the EU line. . . . My [Hungarian] passport is my freedom!" In both of these quotations (and in others that are not cited here), respondents used terms like "pleasure," "fun" and "freedom" to describe the sense of elevated status associated with a boost in travel freedom. The term "pride," which is typically used in the psychological literature to refer to elevated status (e.g., Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019), was not used by respondents.

The Israeli case provides another illustration of a tendency to perceive travel freedom as an object of status competition. Unlike Serbians, Israeli respondents did not complain about the degree of travel freedom provided by their passport and did not perceive it as especially low. And yet, Israeli respondents often mentioned that one of their reasons for obtaining EU passports was the wish to improve their travel freedom. The concrete expression of superior travel freedom was being admitted to the line reserved for EU citizens at airports in Europe. Omer, a 28-year-old computer engineer, explained the value of his Czech passport: "It gives me easy access to European countries—you don't need to stamp it and all that, just show it and go through." Yariv, a 29-year-old lawyer, said that using his Hungarian passport to access the EU-citizens line was "one of my greatest pleasures when I visit Europe." Other respondents spoke of "easy movement," "convenience," "pleasure," and even "fun" associated with taking the EU-citizens line. As in Serbia, they did not mention pride.

These quotations are remarkable because Israeli citizens are already awarded a high level of deference at European ports of entry: no need for a visa, no intrusive questioning, and a high certainty of admission. Those who secured an EU passport gained three rather minor advantages: they could use the EU-citizens line (higher-status space), their waiting time was slightly shorter (duration), and their passport was not stamped (less intrusive procedure). These differences carry very limited practical significance but they are potentially highly relevant in terms of status.

The discrepancy between the strong positive emotions associated with the European passport in Israel and its negligible practical contribution suggests a strong status element. Several respondents explicitly compared the EU-citizens

line to a VIP line, saying that they enjoyed using a separate line that other Israelis could not access. They were particularly delighted to stand in the EU-citizens line and observe other Israelis standing in the less prestigious non-EU line. This suggests that the EU passport was used for a conspicuous display of status aimed at other Israelis.

The current analysis suggests that Serbian and Israeli respondents experienced travel through a status perspective. In a manner consistent with the research on status monitoring and social comparison (Festinger 1954; Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Ridgeway 2019), respondents were highly attentive to small differences in bureaucratic treatment. In line with the literature on status and emotions (Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019), the degree of bureaucratic deference that respondents received evoked painful or pleasant feelings.

### *Selective comparisons*

Serbian respondents perceived their level of travel freedom as shamefully low and experienced mobility controls in the EU as humiliating. Another way of putting it is to say that their travel freedom was lower than their standard of reference, meaning that they engaged in upward comparison. Geographically and historically, Serbia straddles Central Europe and the Balkans. The former term usually refers to the areas that were part of Austria-Hungary (as well as Poland). The latter term mostly refers to territories with a long history of Ottoman Turkish rule. Serbia's northern region of Vojvodina was historically part of Austria-Hungary, whereas central and southern Serbia were Ottoman for centuries. Given their history and geography, Serbians could potentially compare their travel freedom with either their Central European or Balkan neighbors.

Comparing Serbia to the neighboring Central European nations of Slovenia, Hungary, or Croatia entails engaging in upward comparison. These countries are members of the EU and score significantly higher than Serbia in the Human Development Index (HDI), which includes measures of economic output, health, and education (HDI 2019). Serbia's level of travel freedom appears in a different light when compared to its Balkan neighbors, that is, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina; and to nearby Muslim-majority nations, Turkey and Albania. These four nations have roughly the same level of development as Serbia (HDI 2019). Citizens of Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Albania were granted visa-free Schengen access around the same time as Serbia (in 2009 or 2010), while Turkish citizens are still required to obtain visas to enter Schengen, as of 2021. Thus, Serbian travel freedom is equal or sometimes superior relative to those countries.

None of my respondents, however, compared their travel freedom to Balkan nations. All of them engaged in upward comparisons with Central European nations that are EU members and are more developed than Serbia. Respondents expressed deep shame at their country's failure to match these standards. This insistence on upward comparisons can be explained by concepts of cultural similarity as defined in national schemas. The concept of "Europe" is highly prestigious in Serbia and is associated with culture and development. In contrast, the

Balkan region is viewed in a negative light and associated with underdevelopment and violence (Bakic-Hayden and Hayden 1992). Serbian national narratives portray Serbia as a European nation and a defender of Christendom against Islam, and Serbian elites strongly identify as European (Lazić 2003). Accordingly, respondents evaluated Serbia's performance using a European metric and overlooked Balkan nations, especially Muslim-majority ones, which they saw as entirely incomparable. These were, so to speak, excluded comparisons. The tendency to self-identify as European is particularly strong in Vojvodina, with its Austro-Hungarian heritage and significant populations of ethnic Hungarians and Croats.<sup>3</sup>

The Israeli case presents an even stronger example of excluded comparisons. Israeli respondents did not compare their level of travel freedom to the citizens of any other nation. They did not even have an opinion on whether the Israeli passport had high or low value.<sup>4</sup> Israelis could potentially compare themselves either to neighboring Middle Eastern countries, or to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries with comparable levels of development. The Israeli passport offers a degree of travel freedom that was far superior to the Saudi, Jordanian, or Egyptian passports—countries ranked near the bottom of the global passport hierarchy (HVRI 2020). As of 2021, Israel is the only Middle Eastern country alongside the UAE whose citizens enjoy visa-free access to the Schengen area. The comparison to OECD countries that are similar to Israel in terms of human development, such as Spain, Italy, or South Korea, is far less flattering. Those countries' passports are at the top of the mobility hierarchy, with almost 190 visa-free destinations compared to Israel's 160 destinations (HDI 2019; HVRI 2020). The citizens of almost all OECD countries enjoy visa-free access to the United States, which the Israeli passport does not provide. In other words, potentially ample ground exists for downward comparisons with Middle Eastern nations or upward comparisons with other OECD nations. Respondents in Israel, however, did not bring up any comparisons of that kind.

This avoidance of international comparisons was consistent with a prevalent attitude of Israeli exceptionalism. Israelis typically saw their country as *sui generis* and radically different from other countries. Israel is not only the world's only Jewish-majority country, it also has a unique history that sets it apart from Middle Eastern as well as European countries. Israelis did not view themselves as belonging to a broader cultural category such as Europe, the Arab world, or Latin America, and, therefore, had no standard for comparison. Many respondents were well aware that most European passports provided visa-free access to the United States. In fact, this was one of the motivations to apply for EU citizenship. However, it did not occur to any of them to complain about this as unfair. Israelis presumably saw European countries as too different to make such comparisons. It goes without saying that they did not compare themselves to citizens of neighboring Arab countries, with whom Israeli Jews have very limited contact.

On the other hand, Israelis readily compared their levels of travel freedom to other Israelis. The mobility advantage provided by the EU passport was defined vis-à-vis other Israelis, producing pleasurable downward comparison and an

opportunity for status display, or “conspicuous mobility.” These perceptions and sentiments were described in the previous section, and they played an important role in driving demand for EU dual citizenship.

While Israeli Jews had no other nations to compete with in terms of travel freedom, members of Israel’s Arab-Palestinian minority were in a different position. Arab-Israelis share culture, language, and (often) religion with the rest of the Arab world, and many have family ties to Palestinians outside Israel. When traveling abroad, they encounter and interact with citizens of Arab countries such as Jordan or Syria, leading them to engage in comparisons of travel freedom. This produced a downward comparison with similar, comparable others. In a study on the experiences of Arab-Israelis during travel abroad (Nassar 2019), respondents admitted to feeling pleasure when they realized that they had superior mobility relative to Arabs from other countries, while at the same time having conflicted emotions about using their Israeli passports. In this case, as in Vojvodina, ethnicity operates alongside nationality in delimiting the scope of legitimate comparisons.

In conclusion, respondents tended to compare their levels of travel freedom with other nationalities that they perceived as culturally similar. Such comparisons reflect on a nation’s place in global status hierarchies, and therefore touch at the very core of national identity. Accordingly, the scope of legitimate comparisons was rather narrowly defined by national and ethnic schemas. Respondents in Serbia engaged in upward comparison with Central Europeans, producing humiliation and pain but allowing them to perceive themselves as belonging to the high-status European category (cf. R. L. Collins 2000). Meanwhile, Israelis, who saw their country as *sui generis*, simply did not engage in international comparisons. Instead, they sought downward comparisons vis-à-vis other Israelis who did not hold a European passport.

## Conclusion

This article analyzed the global hierarchy of travel freedom from a status perspective. Passport value, which is conditional on citizenship value, determines the scope of travel possibilities and shapes the way that passengers are treated. My interview material demonstrated that passengers experienced international travel as a site of status competition. Lines, waiting times, questioning, and passport stamps were charged with status-relevant significance. Respondents continuously monitored the level of bureaucratic deference that they and others received from border control authorities. This monitoring evoked status-oriented emotions of shame and pleasure. Respondents evaluated their level of travel freedom using standards of comparison drawn from national self-representations: in Serbia, as European; and in Israel as a *sui generis* nation.

Can the article’s findings about the connection between travel freedom and status be generalized beyond Serbia and Israel? Comparable patterns about access as status have been found in countries that neighbor the EU, such as Bosnia (Jansen 2009), Moldova (Knott 2019), and Turkey (Altan-Olcay and Balta 2021). Access to the United States also plays a role in status hierarchies in different

countries. In northern Mexico, for example, a tourist visa to the United States is an important status symbol that signals membership in the middle class (Sarabia 2015; Harpaz 2019). When citizens of Poland were granted visa-free access to the United States in 2019, the country's president celebrated the move as elevating the "dignity" of Poles (*The First News* 2019). These examples suggest that my findings are part of a broader pattern. Travel freedom equals status, and EU and U.S. visa policies shape status hierarchies among nations and individuals.

In Western societies, travel-related status competition mostly centers on income-based travel classes rather than nationality-based restrictions (Schwartz 2020). However, with the widespread travel restrictions that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens of Western countries face new sets of travel bans and screening procedures. Pandemic-related travel restrictions (e.g., the division into "red" and "green" countries) carry connotations of cleanliness and moral worth that may enhance status implications. Covid-induced travel restrictions, which will likely be maintained for years, are expected to strengthen the connection between travel freedom and social status, reinforcing the relevance of this article's findings.

The concept of international travel freedom as status contributes to three literatures. First, the article contributes to the study of migration by highlighting the close association between mobility and status. Students of migration have traditionally focused on immigrants' economic motives (e.g., Massey et al. 1993; Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009). Once we take social cognition processes into account, new dimensions of migration come to light. My findings highlight the unintended consequences of institutions set up to control migration. The international visa system, which is mainly designed to restrict immigration, has inadvertently produced a global hierarchy where high status equals free access to the territories of developed countries. Mobility gaps between passports provide an important motivation for individuals to seek a second citizenship, not only on the basis of ancestry (Harpaz 2013, 2019) but also through naturalization (Paul 2011) or financial investment (Surak 2021). Indeed, demand for investment-based visas and citizenship is partly driven by status competition among elite families (Liu-Farrer 2016). Finally, the approach developed here helps to explain attitudes toward immigration. Immigrants, and especially undocumented immigrants, are usually perceived as low status (Lee and Fiske 2006). My findings suggest that individuals subjected to stringent mobility controls—in other words, nondeferential bureaucratic treatment—are perceived (and perceive themselves) as low status *ipso facto*. This leads us to expect that the visibility of immigration enforcement would affect natives' views of immigrants.

Second, the article's findings contribute to the literature on social cognition and status. My analysis took models of social cognition that were mostly developed through lab experiments and applied them to the analysis of interview data. Doing so helps to establish the validity of these models while refining the concepts that they use. For example, the feeling of elevated status is described in the literature as pride (Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss 2019), but that term did not come up spontaneously in the interviews. Instead, respondents referred to elevated status using terms like "pleasure," "fun," or "freedom." This may suggest

that pride is only applicable when the status gain is a direct result of the individual's own striving. Another contribution to the social cognition literature has to do with status differences between different groups. Social science thinking about status differences among ethnic, national, or racial categories usually focuses on long-standing, relatively stable stereotypes and relations (Bergsieker et al. 2012). My findings suggest that at least one aspect of collective status hierarchies—their connection with travel freedom—may be flexible and dynamic.

Third, the article contributes to the study of globalization by highlighting an overlooked subjective dimension of global inequality. Scholars have hitherto explored global inequality by analyzing objective data from global indices (Milanovic 2016; Harpaz 2019; Kálin and Kochenov 2019). The current work is one of the first to systematically explore the subjective components of this system of stratification (cf. Bauman 1998). Gaps in international travel freedom provide a salient, concrete site where individuals experience global inequality and disparities in citizenship value.

Overall, this article demonstrates the utility of applying the concepts of social cognition and social comparison to the study of contemporary mobilities. Individual-level cognitive processes and global systemic structures can best be understood when analyzed in conjunction. The seemingly neutral institutions set up to control migration become charged with subjective meaning. Such meanings, in turn, motivate individuals to immigrate or acquire dual citizenship, and even impact relations between countries. This point closely aligns with those made by Fiske and Vari-Lavoisier in the introduction to this volume. There is enormous potential for cross-fertilization between cognitive and sociological approaches to migration.

## Notes

1. Entering a country with a tourist visa and then overstaying is a common strategy of undocumented immigration. For example, half of undocumented immigrants in the United States consist of people who entered the country legally but overstayed their visa (Neumayer 2006).

2. The Israeli sample included Jews living in Tel-Aviv and the surrounding area. Leading countries of second citizenship were Germany (fifteen respondents), Romania (ten), France (nine), and Poland (five). All but four of the respondents were born in Israel. Forty interviewees were under 40 years old, and ten were between 50 and 70 years old. The Serbian sample was ethnically diverse, including ethnic Hungarians (twenty-one respondents), ethnic Serbs (nineteen), and people of mixed origin (eight). Here, I use the term Serbians to refer to citizens of Serbia regardless of ethnicity. Respondents were drawn from the Belgrade area (nineteen respondents) and from towns around Vojvodina (twenty-seven), and I also interviewed two emigrants living in Western Europe. All interviewees were born in Serbia. Thirty-six among them were under 40 years old, and twelve were 41 or older. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on dual citizenship. The project was approved by Princeton University Institutional Review Board. All respondents were adults and gave written or recorded consent.

3. There may also be some selection bias at work: people with a more European orientation are more likely to seek EU citizenship.

4. Some respondents mentioned the special security challenges that Israelis face when traveling abroad, as well as the special protection Israel provides its citizens, but this was not perceived through a status perspective.

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