

Skill-Selection and Socioeconomic Status: An Analysis of Migration and Domestic Justice

1. Introduction

Questions of discretionary admissions lie between the rarely endorsed ideal types of fully open and closed borders. Focusing on immigration into high-income countries, the discussion usually accepts the following claims.ⁱ First, there will be a larger number of would-be migrants seeking entry than countries are willing to admit. Second, they need not accept all applicants and can exercise some discretion in admissions. And third, their power to choose between would-be immigrants is constrained by demands of justice.

Most philosophers have found race, gender, and religion to be impermissible criteria for exclusion. While any given non-refugee from among these groups might be justly excluded, *policies* that exclude on these bases are unjust. Such policies exacerbate extant status harms, reinforcing beliefs that the excluded—as well as citizens and residents of the state (hereafter, ‘residents’) who share the relevant traits or identities—are less desirable *because of* these traits or identities.ⁱⁱ In such cases it is not the mobility rights of those excluded that determines the impermissibility of discretionary policies. Rather, it is the manner and form such policies take—a general statement that such people are not suitable, or are less well-suited, for admission.

Unlike race, gender, and religion, the dominant view is that skill-selection is an acceptable form of discrimination. It is justified insofar as it is enacted in pursuit of legitimate state interests. And it does not communicate to the “unskilled”—or those with low-socioeconomic status (SES)—that they are less valuable.ⁱⁱⁱ However, I argue that this is a mistake.

In this paper I present two reasons why generalized skill-selection is *pro tanto* unjust. First, such policies feed into existing biases, exacerbating status harms for low-SES residents. The claim that we prefer the skilled to the unskilled, the educated to the uneducated, and the financially secure to the insecure is also heard by residents. And there is considerable overlap between this message and the stereotypes and biases that set the social status of low-SES residents. Skill-selection can reinforce these biases, offering state support for the claim that those with high-SES are more desirable *as members of the society*.

Second, the need for skilled immigrants ordinarily depends upon and reinforces failures of fair equality of opportunity (FEO). According to the *dependency thesis*, the need for skilled migrants stems from a failure to ensure domestic FEO. Many low-SES residents would inarguably desire to work, for example, as doctors or nurses. However, unequal education, as well as poverty and debt, have made such opportunities largely inaccessible. According to the *reinforcement thesis*, skill-selection

disincentivizes the pursuit of FEO. A state that can meet domestic labor needs through less costly immigration policies will be disinclined to pursue programs designed to equalize opportunities for low-SES residents. This is particularly true if, as I argue, the status harms generated by skill-selection provide an additional barrier to pursuing FEO.

Generalized skill-selective policies are, therefore, *pro tanto* unjust. However, this is not an argument for *excluding* the skilled. On the one hand, skilled immigrants can be admitted through other policies—open borders, family-reunification, or an admissions lottery—without the state either signaling that the skilled are more desirable or perpetuating failures of FEO. On the other hand, states can, in response to local emergencies, temporarily select for particular professions without contributing to either of these injustices. These concerns only arise when the state enacts an explicit policy according to which skill is, in general and indefinitely, prioritized and where skilled migrants are admitted for prolonged periods of time.^{iv} As noted by Ayelet Shachar, there is something unique—both historically and normatively—about turning “merit and extraordinary talent into a core criterion for admission and settlement” (2019, 196).

This is also not an argument that privileges domestic over global justice, or that places the interests of residents above those of non-residents. Instead, the goal is only to illustrate a novel problem with skill-selective policies, showing how they contribute to domestic injustice. First, it is only a *pro tanto* argument against skill-selection. Strong enough reasons, grounded in the interests of non-residents, could override the interests of citizens.

Second, states need not de-prioritize skilled applicants, but need only cease prioritizing those would-be migrants who are already privileged. Skill-selective policies disproportionately select those who have been fortunate enough to receive advanced education and training. They therefore select the more-advantaged within sending countries, excluding those for whom immigration offers a means of escaping poverty.^v Without skill-selection, those in greater need of migration will have a better chance of gaining entry—at least so long as high-income countries continue to avail themselves of the economic benefits brought by immigration (Ypi 2018, 146).^{vi}

2. *Discretionary Admissions & Group Identity*

Philosophers working on discretionary admissions often engage in a counterfactual analysis. *If* states have the right to control their borders, *then* which reasons for excluding or including are permissible? With this lens, even open border advocates can investigate the legitimacy of discretionary admissions policies.^{vii} The discussion then focuses on whether there are legitimate grounds for different policies,

and whether they are sufficiently respectful of the equal moral personhood of those excluded—or of residents who share the same traits that led to their exclusion.

In setting discretionary admissions policies, states engage with would-be immigrants as bearers of multiple traits and identities. Petitioners present themselves as members of a particular race, nationality, religion, gender, sexual identity, class, and potential profession. Some present as having family within the country and seek reunification. Others present as asylum-seekers. It is on these bases that states adjudicate between competing claims. It is also on these bases that such powers are constrained.

The limits of this discretionary power are sometimes firm, and states find that there are some migrants that international law, justice, and decency do not permit them to exclude. The injustice of refusing the asylum-seeker at your door is independent of the tone used or the justification given. The act of refusal itself is wrong.

In other cases, it is not about any antecedent rights held by petitioners, but the criteria used for exclusion and how they treat marginalized groups. Immigration policies can be unjust by virtue of invidiously discriminating between would-be immigrants. As noted by José Jorge Mendoza, this can take the form of either *direct* or *indirect* discrimination (2018).

Direct discrimination occurs “when policies explicitly use membership in what are today called protected classes...as a criterion for exclusion” or when a migration policy “favors or rewards members of historically advantaged groups” over marginalized applicants (2018, 255). For example, assuming that they are not refugees or asylum seekers, and that states have some right to select between would-be immigrants, no particular Muslim has a right to admission (Blake 2008, 966). However, Muslim bans are directly discriminatory and, hence, unjust.

Indirect discrimination, however, is more subtle. While maintaining facial neutrality, such policies “covertly...target members of a protected class or unfairly benefit members of historically advantaged groups” (Mendoza 2018, 258). For example, desiring to restrict the immigration of Muslims, states might use alleged concerns over terrorism to institute a travel ban for a handful of predominantly Muslim countries. This can express disrespect and undermine equal status if the targeted groups see through the veneer of facial neutrality.

Discretionary policies have these effects because they evaluate individual applicants by virtue of generalizable traits and identities. Prioritizing white petitioners does not just say that this person, who happens to be white, is more desirable than another who happens to be Black. Instead, it says

that the former is more desirable *because* they are white, and the latter less desirable *because* they are Black. This message generalizes. It affects the status of all similarly situated would-be immigrants.

Moreover, these group-based discretionary decisions do not simply say that white applicants are more valuable than Black applicants *as immigrants*. The message is, again, more universal. To deprioritize or exclude Black applicants says that they are less valuable *as members of the society*. Importantly, Black and white residents cannot help but also hear, and be affected by, this message.

2.1. *Justice & Discretionary Admissions*

Most philosophers of migration have agreed that race, gender, and religion are impermissible grounds for discriminating between would-be immigrants. Overwhelmingly, however, philosophers have held that skill-selection is legitimate. On their view, it does not violate any independent rights to migration, it does not denigrate the excluded, and it is in pursuit of recognized state interests.

In his chapter on discretionary admissions—where he sets aside his support for open borders and analyzes how states might discriminate between applicants—Joseph Carens considers which principles for exclusion and selection are compatible with democratic values. In evaluating different criteria, he primarily uses two considerations: legitimate state interests and respect for the claims of equal persons (2013, 178). Carens suggests that race, ethnicity, ideology, and religion are impermissible grounds for exclusion. Not only are they incompatible with respecting the moral claims of nonresidents, but they are not in pursuit of any legitimate state interest. Financial need and family ties, however, are acceptable. And though he does not consider skill-selection directly, economic potential is used in many skill-selective policies. According to Carens, the state has a legitimate interest in economic potential, and those without it are not denigrated by their exclusion. Therefore, their exclusion is permissible even if it is ungenerous (2013, 185).

Michael Blake begins by analyzing the relationship between would-be immigrants and the state. By petitioning for entry, they place themselves at the administrative and coercive mercy of a state with whom they previously had no relationship (2020, 120). And while legal and coercive ties binding the two together are considerably weaker than between state and resident, they are nonetheless present and demand justification. The moral equality of persons means that coercion must be based on reasons that those excluded cannot reasonably reject. We must avoid cases where accepting their exclusion requires that people endorse their own unequal moral status (2020, 121). On this view, race-based criteria are impermissible. Non-white migrants excluded based on race must either reject the state's decision *or* reject their own equal personhood.

Furthermore, migration policies do not *only* have implications for non-residents. Criteria for exclusion can also be impermissible if they communicate disrespect towards already marginalized or oppressed residents (2020, 127). Race-based exclusion is, therefore, also wrong for a second reason: it says that residents of that race are less desirable than their compatriots.

Skill-selection, however, does not require that those excluded—or similarly situated residents—endorse their own inferiority. Instead, Blake argues that it is “of neutral concern,” and does not “rest upon anything approaching animus or moral incapacity” (2020, 135). Those excluded on this basis—and residents relevantly like them—can accept the state’s decision without endorsing their moral inferiority.

Some philosophers have argued not only that skill-selective policies can be accepted by residents but that they are in fact in their interest. According to Douglas MacKay, skill-selection is justified insofar as it promotes economic success, which is vital for pursuing the well-being of disadvantaged residents (2016, 133-4). Moreover, MacKay argues that such policies do not generate status harms for low-SES citizens. Specifically, skill-selection does not say that the unskilled are “unfit” for membership, but only “that skill is valuable and a legitimate reason for favoring one prospective immigrant over another” (2016, 135). Therefore, skill-selection is, on balance, beneficial to low-SES residents.

Sarah Song notes that low-skill immigration might depress wages for low-skill residents (2019, 166). The increased number of low-wage workers provides a larger pool from which employers can select, further diminishing the bargaining power of domestic workers. Thus, we might think that closing our borders to all except the skilled would be the best way to secure domestic justice.

Song, however, rejects such protectionist responses. We need not pit the interests of residents against would-be immigrants. Rather, we should combine immigration policies with “minimum wage laws, better working conditions, and health and social welfare policies” (2019, 167). The hope is that such policies can also mitigate against the rising tide of nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes. Rather than feeding these narratives by closing the borders—or allowing them to fester by ignoring the effects of immigration—this solution aims to eliminate the economic costs that led to hostility in the first place.

The responses of Carens, Blake, MacKay, and Song are emblematic of the dominant trend in the literature on discretionary admissions. Insofar as skill and economic contribution are beneficial, receiving countries have a clear interest in selectively admitting on these bases. And prioritizing skill does not, it is said, violate the rights either of residents or those excluded.^{viii} Accordingly, if states have

some right to discretionary control over their borders, these are legitimate bases on which to discriminate between would-be immigrants.

Desiree Lim is one of the few exceptions, as well as one of the only philosophers to have written extensively on skill-selection. Lim has advanced two explanations as to why skill-selection is unjust. First, it exacerbates disrespectful and demeaning attitudes about women. Globally, women are less likely to have an advanced degree, with this discrepancy being greater from middle- and low-income countries (Antoninis 2019). Moreover, they are less likely to have the work experience necessary to meet the thresholds for expected economic contribution.^{ix} This is especially true since, according to Shelley Wilcox, “in the context of a sexist society that devalues work traditionally performed by women,” skill-selective policies are themselves rooted in gendered biases (2005, 219). Finally, since they will more often be excluded on “merit” and included as companions to their “skilled” husbands or fathers, such policies reinforce “existing beliefs about the inferiority of female workers’ contributions, as well as women’s status as passive or helpless dependents” (Lim 2019, 907).

Second, skill-selection expresses racialized disrespect for low-skill foreigners (Lim 2017). Within the context of xenophobic and racist beliefs about “good” and “bad” foreigners, dividing non-residents into two groups—the good, talented, and hard-working versus the bad, dangerous, and greedy—and labeling the former meritorious and worth admitting, and the latter untalented and not worth admitting, is not simply a benign promotion of national self-interest. Rather, this builds on and reinforces these negative and harmful attitudes. While xenophobia and racism afflict immigrants in general, they are disproportionately felt by those perceived to be less skilled.^x

Lim’s work has done much to problematize skill-selection. Rather than simply being a neutral preference for skill, such policies constitute a form of indirect discrimination.^{xi} Despite not explicitly mentioning race or gender, they “express contempt” for non-white, unskilled (and more often women) foreigners (2017, 384). However, I argue that such policies also denigrate and undermine the social status of low-SES residents. Although they do not mention SES, the markers of merit that they deploy overlap with the features of low-SES residents that construct their lower social status.

We cannot say that we prefer the skilled to the unskilled, the economically comfortable to the dependent, and the educated to the uneducated *only to those seeking admission*. This message is more universal. As Blake notes, “[w]hat a state says at its borders... is heard by people within those borders” (2020, 127). Therefore, the denigrating message sent to the unskilled foreigner is also heard by low-SES residents. And insofar as this message tracks dominant SES-based biases and stereotypes, this not only contributes to status harms, but also to differential social, political, and economic treatment.^{xii}

3. *Skill-Selection and Socioeconomic Status*

A standard argument against race-based immigration policies goes as follows:

- 1) State policies that exacerbate status harms are *pro tanto* unjust.
- 2) Non-white people, and Black people in particular, experience status harms in high-income receiving countries.
- 3) To exclude (or disfavor) based on race can exacerbate status harms in two related ways: a) it says that those selected against are less suitable for, or less desirable as, members of the society, and b) this public statement can reinforce existing biases and stereotypes about them.
- 4) What is said to would-be migrants is also heard by residents.
- 5) Therefore, race-based migration policies can: a) communicate that non-white people are less desirable as members of the society and b) reinforce existing biases and stereotypes about them.
- 6) Therefore, such policies can exacerbate status harms for both non-white non-residents and residents.
- 7) Therefore, such policies are *pro tanto* unjust towards both residents and non-residents.

In this section I will focus on a SES-based version of this argument, illustrating why skill-selection is *pro tanto* unjust insofar as such policies likely contribute to domestic status harms. In doing so, I will focus on the second and third premises.^{xiii}

This argument gains considerable traction when deployed against exclusion based on race, gender, or religion. First, such policies are often transparently discriminatory—consider the Chinese Exclusion Act, the White Australia policy, and Trump’s Muslim Ban. They explicitly target an ‘undesirable’ group and label them unworthy—or less worthy—of admission. Second, we have a clear understanding of how race, gender, and religion affect social status and widely recognize racial, gendered, and religious discrimination as unjust. And third, we can readily see the thread between discriminatory migration policies regarding these groups and their unequal social status.

The argument with skill requires more care. Most philosophers do not interpret skill-selection as saying anything—directly or indirectly—about people with low-SES. And much less work in liberal political philosophy engages with the issue of SES and how it affects social status. Finally, skill-selection does not explicitly exclude based on low-SES, and so any discrimination is indirect. For these

reasons I will spend time discussing skill-selection policies and the nature of SES. Ultimately, I argue that there is sufficient overlap between the traits selected against and several biases and stereotypes that affect the self-conception and social positionality of low-SES residents.

3.1. Skill-Selection Policies

Skill-selection is becoming increasingly predominant, with two thirds of OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries implementing, or having implemented, skill-selective policies (Chand and Tung 2017, 336). However, a handful of countries are responsible for the bulk of skilled migration. For example, the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia “are host to nearly 70% of skilled immigrants to OECD countries” (2017, 336). In this section I briefly describe the policies used in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia, illustrating how different states define skill and select between applicants.

The Trump administration proposed a two-part shift in US admissions policies. First, the proposal involved a transition from 66% family reunification and 12% merit-based selection to 22% family and 57% merit (VOA News 2019). Second, it sought to reshape how merit is understood. Applicants would be ‘graded’ based on five metrics: 1) US civics test score; 2) age; 3) English proficiency; 4) employment, investment, or jobs-creation pledges; and 5) educational or vocational certificates (CNBC 2019). Each metric is broken down into tiers, with higher tiers providing more points. For example, applicants receive 1 point for a high school degree and 13 for the equivalent of a US doctorate. Points for employment are tied to wages, with 5 being allocated for a job that is “at least 150% of the median household income in the state where he or she will be employed” and 13 if it is at least 300% of the median income (CNN 2017). In this way, income and education come to define merit.

While Trump’s proposal never came to fruition, the UK *did* recently shift to a new points-based skill-selection system. This system erases Schengen Area favoritism and instead “treats EU and non-EU citizens equally and aims to attract people who can contribute to the UK’s economy” (GOV.UK 2020a). Petitioners must receive all 50 Non-tradeable points: 20 for an approved job offer, 20 for the job being at an appropriate skill level, and 10 for English language proficiency (GOV.UK 2020b). They must also receive at least 20 Tradeable points from two categories: Salary and Other. For Salary, applicants receive 0 points for a salary at or above £20,480, 10 if at least £23,040, and 20 if it exceeds £24,599. Under Other, they get 10 for a relevant PhD, 20 for a relevant STEM PhD, 20 if the job is in a “shortage occupation,” and 20 if they are new to the labor market.

In Canada's system, potential immigrants who meet the minimum requirements for the Federal Skilled Worker Program must receive at least 67 of 100 points from six criteria. These include language (up to 28); education (25); work experience (15); age (12); arranged employment (10); and adaptability (10). If successful, they are ranked against other eligible candidates in a 1,200-point system, broken down into Core/human capital factors (500 points), Skill transferability factors (100) and Additional criteria (600) (Library of Congress Law 2020).

Focusing on human capital, would-be immigrants receive points for their skills and experience; their spouse or common law partner's education and language skills; and their skill transferability, which includes educational background and work experience. These factors are broken down along a wider range than Trump's proposal or the UK's system. For example, if they come without a partner or spouse, they receive 0 points if they do not have a high school degree. However, a high school degree is worth 28 points and a Doctoral level degree is worth 140.

Finally, "Australia accepted an estimated 163,000 immigrants in 2017, of which about 111,000 were skilled immigrants" (Chand and Tung 2017, 341). Under general skilled migration, applicants "are selected on the basis of their nominated occupation, age, skills, qualifications, English language ability and employability" (Parliament of Australia 2010). The distinguished talent track prioritizes those who have "special or unique talents of benefit to Australia," including athletes, musicians, and those internationally recognized in their field.

While these policies differ, there are important similarities. First, rather than responding to temporary local needs or merely balancing the proportion of incoming degrees to the current population, these policies work to promote skilled migration *full stop*. They exemplify the current trend of countries competing to secure 'human capital' and, therefore, include an implicit statement that 'human capital' in general is preferred (Ypi 2018, 144).

Second, they have instituted or sought to institute a points-based system. Such policies include a clear statement of the metrics of merit. People can take a survey that tells them how many 'points' they are worth and how this tracks the requirements for admission. And third, they often utilize the same metrics. The prioritization of advanced degrees in Trump's proposal is central to Canadian and UK policies. While Australia and Canada only indirectly select for salary—offering points for employment in 'skilled' sectors of the labor market—the UK uses, and Trump proposed, an explicit prioritization of higher expected incomes (GOV.UK 2020b and CNN 2017). And each includes a preference for 'skilled' work or training.

I will argue that these features—a sweeping preference for skilled migrants, particularly in the form of a points-based approach where education, skilled work, and economic security are prioritized—make skill-selection relevantly like other forms of group- or trait-based discretionary policies. It evaluates would-be migrants based on generalizable traits and attributes. These traits and attributes are also intimately bound up in self- and other-appraisals and affect the social status of residents who share (or find themselves lacking) in them.

3.2. Socioeconomic Status & Social Denigration

In this section I focus on the empirical literature regarding the effects of SES, organizing the discussion around three markers of low-SES: poverty; unequal educational attainment; and a lack of workplace prestige. Each affects how we see ourselves and are seen by others, shaping the phenomenology of SES. Poverty is the primary lens through which most understand SES. Lacking a nuanced class analysis, we often deploy three categories: the rich, the poor, and the middle class. Though these categories are only loosely fixed through a rough understanding of material holdings, they rigidly shape social attitudes in predictable ways.

Research on explicit attitudes shows “that the rich are viewed ambivalently (competent but cold), in contrast to the poor who are perceived uniformly negatively (incompetent and cold) and the middle class who are perceived uniformly positively (competent and warm)” (Horwitz and Dovidio 2017, 6). Implicit attitudes shake up this picture. While implicit attitudes towards the poor remained negative, and lower than those regarding the middle class or rich, implicit attitudes towards the rich were uniformly positive (2017, 22). Lior Erez goes so far as to say that poor people are, “as a social class...no less stigmatized, or thought of as inferior, than ethnic or sexual minorities” (2021, 163). These biases congeal early, finding a ready home in children who quickly learn and retain stereotypes (Bigler and Liben 2007), and can “easily list stereotypes associated with” the rich, middle class, and poor (Horwitz and Dovidio 2017, 5).

Poverty is also, according to the dominant ideology, something for which the poor are largely responsible. At least in the US, research shows that people “believe that there are multiple determinants of poverty but that individualistic or ‘internal’ causes (e.g., lack of effort, being lazy, low intelligence, being on drugs) tend to be more important than societal or ‘external’ ones” (Cozzarelli 2001, 209). This not only impacts social support, as I discuss in section 4.2, but it exacerbates the stigma surrounding poverty.

The second marker is educational inequality. Research shows that the less educated are not only perceived less warmly than the educated, but that they are viewed even more negatively than the poor. (Kuppens et al 2018, 444). And much like poverty, the less educated are also blamed and held responsible for their lack of education (2018, 444).

Sennett and Cobb found that internal development—a proxy for education, skilled work, and workplace autonomy—has become a primary marker of SES and personal value. More than poverty, a recognition of unequal education and development “is the injury of class, in day-to-day existence, that the people we encounter face; it is a tangled relationship of denied freedom and dignity” (1972, 118). This injury profoundly affects self-conception. According to one of their interviewees, “people of a higher class have a power to judge him because they are more internally developed human beings” (1972, 25). This sentiment was echoed in an interview by Sennett, where a janitor said that the middle class “treat him as though he were invisible, ‘as a zero,’ and that they were justified in this “because of his lack of education and menial status” (1998, 17). Lack of education and internal development becomes a badge that signifies a lack of merit and personal value.

The final marker, one deeply connected with education and internal development, is workplace prestige. Sennett and Cobb interviewed a pipe-fitter who “makes twice the salary of his neighbor; yet when they meet, the pipefitter calls the schoolteacher ‘Mister’ and is called in turn by his first name” (1972, 35). Workplace prestige affects status even when de-tethered from poverty or income inequality. In a society where people dedicate much of their lives to work—and where some do highly skilled work with authority, prestige, and skill, while others are controlled, denigrated, and perform ‘menial’ or ‘rote’ functions—our jobs shape our internal worlds and our self-conceptions.

The internalization of these markers—particularly educational inequality and workplace prestige—shapes the phenomenology of low-SES, ensuring that the experience is not simply about external facts regarding poverty and inequality. Instead, Pauline Bart argues that the experience of low-SES is shaped less by money and more by “power and [p]restige and self-concept and self-image and ‘lifestyle,’ and whether you can get your teeth straightened...and whether you want to do so” (Russell 1996, 62). It infects one’s entire self-conception. As Amy Reed-Sandoval notes, “[c]lass identity is embodied” and visibly affects one’s shape, diet, size, and even color (2020, 79). Through this, those with low-SES come to view themselves, and be visibly identifiable, as less developed, intelligent, morally upstanding, or even attractive. And, importantly, they often feel this is something that they deserve. Accordingly, “[s]hame seems to be a nearly ubiquitous aspect of internalized classism” (Russell 1996, 64).

In addition to shaping how we see ourselves, these biases shape how we are perceived and treated by others. According to Iris Marion Young, “norms of respectability...are associated specifically with professional culture. Professional dress, speech, tastes, demeanor, all connote respectability” (1990, 57). Not appearing professional or middle-class can undermine your chances when interviewing for a job or seeking a loan (1990, 58). The visible signs of SES allow implicit and explicit biases to operate in discretionary decisions.^{xiv}

3.3. *Contempt for the Meritless, Preference for the Meritorious*

These three markers are not all found in everyone who is, or understands themselves as, low-SES. As such, unless we utilize an orthodox Marxist class analysis—one that, at present, is not part of a coherent class consciousness in western liberal societies—a univocal conception will be out of reach. I suggest, for the purposes of this project, that we see these markers as helping form a cluster of attributions that affect the social positionality and self-conceptions of those with low-SES.^{xv} While those with the lowest-SES will have all three, those who are *merely* poor, uneducated, or perform low-prestige jobs have *parts* of their identity and status shaped by this reality.

These markers also track many of the metrics of merit used in skill-selection. In assigning more points for skilled work, higher education, and higher salaries, states indicate that these make would-be immigrants more valuable. By implication, this suggests that unskilled work, a lack of education, and poverty make applicants less desirable as members of the society.^{xvi} And in a points-based system, we can see exactly how much more or less desirable our skills, education, and salaries make us in the eyes of the state. This can serve to denigrate or further undermine the status of low-SES non-residents

However, such policies can also affect the social status of low-SES residents. We cannot say that we prefer the skilled to the unskilled, the economically comfortable to the dependent, and the educated to the uneducated *only to those seeking admission*. This message is more universal. To say that would-be immigrants make more or less desirable residents on the basis of these metrics similarly signals that they affect the desirability of current residents.

Given the research on SES described above, the second premise applies: those with low-SES suffer status harms. Points-based skill-selection—generalized policies that indefinitely prioritize ‘human capital’—suggests that those excluded are less desirable *as members of the society*. Finally, the overlap between these traits and those elements of SES that shape social status suggests that it is liable to reinforce existing stereotypes and biases. As such, both parts of premise three also apply.

The argument for the *pro tanto* impermissibility of race-based discretionary decisions, therefore, applies with skill-selection, and goes as follows:

- 1) Policies that exacerbate status harms are *pro tanto* unjust.
- 2) Those with (any of) the three elements of low-SES suffer status harms.
- 3) To exclude or (disfavor) based on low-SES can exacerbate status harms in two related ways: a) it says to those selected against that they are less suitable for, or less desirable as, members of the society, and b) this public statement can reinforce existing biases and stereotypes about them.
- 4) What is said to would-be immigrants is also heard by residents.
- 5) Therefore, policies that exclude (or disfavor) based on SES can: a) communicate that those with low-SES are less desirable as members of the society and b) reinforce existing biases and stereotypes about them.
- 6) Therefore, such policies can exacerbate status harms for both low-SES non-residents and residents.
- 7) Therefore, such policies are *pro tanto* unjust towards both non-residents and residents.

However, skill-selection does not *merely* contribute to status harms, as if these floated free from other problems of justice. Instead, status harms can justify—or at least undermine criticisms of—other injustices. If those at the bottom of a status hierarchy “deserve” their social position, then any resulting inequalities are natural and not a result of cruelty or callousness. Moreover, social status can lead to differential treatment. Insofar as skill-selection contributes to SES-based status harms, it can therefore lead to more tangible harms.

4. Equal Opportunity & the Import of Foreign Labor

In this section I consider the relationship between skill-selection and FEO. As Rawls defines it, FEO has two components. First, people must have formal access to all relevant opportunities—there must be no explicit systems of discrimination preventing certain groups from securing desirable positions or offices. Second, “those with the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin” (2001, 44).

The second requirement has two main elements: there must not be excessive inequalities, and there must be equal educational opportunities (2001, 44). While one might read equal educational

opportunities as demanding only public schools with comparable funding and meritocratic college admissions, Rawls's demands are more substantive. Equalizing educational opportunities, regardless of the social class of one's family, is a process that begins at birth and extends beyond the schoolhouse walls. It requires severing the connection between family wealth and life chances.

As noted by Brian Barry, this requires adequate prenatal nutrition, which is vital for ensuring cognitive development (2005, 47-48). It involves eliminating environmental toxins and pollutants that have deleterious effects on cognitive development (2005, 48). And because of the developmental role played by those outside of the classroom, it also demands parental leave (2005, 49), limitations on the work week (2005, 55), and access to quality, trained childcare (2005, 52). These are only a few requirements that Barry considers and will have to be supplemented by significant changes to the quality of public school systems, implicit and explicit bias training for teachers, and affordable or free college education. Without these being met, SES remains generationally entrenched.

Skill-selection both depends upon and reinforces failures of FEO. States need skilled immigrants largely because residents have been trapped in cycles of poverty and low-SES.^{xvii} And selecting for skill perpetuates these cycles over time, making it less likely that states use the resources needed to secure FEO.

4.1. The Dependency Thesis

Skill-selection does not occur in a vacuum, but within the context of a broad array of socioeconomic policies and needs. It seeks to procure desirable immigrants, where desirability is not a natural fact but depends upon present and predictable needs. Many high-income countries have a demand for skilled labor that outstrips the existing supply. They use skill-selection to ameliorate this problem, bringing in a supply sufficient to meet domestic demand.

In the high-income countries currently employing or considering skill-selection, the need for skilled labor is predicated upon policy decisions. The failure of domestic labor markets to meet the existing demand for skilled labor is not due to a recent development of skilled-labor-dependent industry, nor is it a product of full employment. It is also not because residents are *unwilling* to perform this work. Low-SES residents do not clean houses or work at fast food restaurants because they prefer these options to becoming nurses, doctors, or software designers. They do so because they are unable to secure high-paying, prestigious work.^{xviii}

Developing people into skilled workers is costly. For the least-advantaged to have a plausible chance at high educational attainment the state must not only provide free or affordable educational

opportunities, but it must also clear away the barriers to success for low-SES residents. Failing to do so constitutes a failure of FEO. It helps cement low-SES as an inheritance of those born into low-SES families. The need for skill-selection, therefore, is both artificial and dependent upon prior injustice.

4.2. The Reinforcement Thesis

Skill-selection also reinforces and helps justify failures of FEO in the future. First, by exacerbating SES-based stereotypes it can affect treatment by others, including educators, hiring committees, and voters considering social programs targeted at helping low-SES residents. Having equal access to equal caliber schools is necessary but not sufficient for FEO. As I discuss in this section, biases and stereotypes can also promote unequal treatment by educators, employers, and admissions boards. Insofar as skill-selective policies contribute to these stereotypes and biases, they contribute to unequal opportunities.

Stereotypes and biases help justify and maintain low-SES. They give support to the belief that low-SES is a result of individual failure rather than structural injustice. Through this, negative stereotypes are converted into system-justifying beliefs. Sadly, such views are not only held by the affluent, but by the least-advantaged. Interviews with poor Latina and Black mothers in the US showed that most held system-justifying beliefs, blaming the allegedly deficient character of the poor for their poverty (Jost 2017, 75). As above, these beliefs also exist with education, with the educated and uneducated alike holding the latter responsible for their lack of education.

Ultimately, acceptance of stereotypes and system-justifying beliefs can lead those with low-SES to have an ambivalent attitude towards their own self-worth. Moreover, it can undermine their motivation to struggle for system change. Rather than looking at structural causes of poverty it makes them look inward, seeking to identify what it is about themselves that makes them unable to thrive. Such beliefs help render the socioeconomic hierarchy both natural and inevitable.

Stereotypes regarding SES also operate in the education system, with students' treatment being impacted by SES-based beliefs about intelligence, attitude, and parental support. According to Sennett and Cobb, "teachers act on their expectations of students in such a way as to *make* the expectations become reality" (1972, 81). Poor students arrive at school and are confronted by teachers with biases and stereotypes already internalized. These biases can lead teachers to "misinterpret a student's words and actions, confusing the student's learned helplessness or trauma-based anxiety with disrespect or defiance. Students are labeled lazy, slovenly, hyperactive, aggressive, or indolent" (Gibson and Barr

2017, 42). Research shows that teachers evaluate even identical performance unequally based on SES, perceiving the work as lower quality and the student as less likely to have future academic success if they are coded as poor (Bertran et al 2021, 16-17).

Biases also contribute to a general refusal to support social programs dedicated to improving the position of low-SES residents. If you see poverty and a lack of education as the fault of the poor and least-educated, social spending on their behalf becomes irrational. For example, those who endorse individualist ideologies show decreased support for redistributive policies, whereas those who have “system-challenging beliefs,” including structural explanations for unequal opportunities, indicate increased support for redistribution (Hunt and Bullock 2016, 106). If everybody can succeed—and if individual failure is caused by a lack of desire, low intelligence, and low moral character—then we do not need social welfare programs. And if personal failures lead to low-SES, then welfare programs are unlikely to help. They simply provide more resources for the “profligate poor” to waste.

Second, skill-selection removes the incentive for officials to pursue FEO. If they can secure cheaper foreign labor—whose education was funded by their home country—then there is a strong reason to avoid ‘wasting’ resources educating residents.^{xix} And, as above, pursuing FEO requires much more than paying for education. It requires ensuring that people have the resources—healthcare, time off work, childcare, and money—to make use of educational opportunities.

Without being able to select for skilled labor, high-income countries would have a stronger impetus to work towards FEO. Filling these positions would require giving low-SES residents the tools with which to do so. As such, eliminating skill-selective policies would have effects that extend beyond status and stereotypes. Doing so can also remove barriers to domestic FEO.

Skill-selective policies are, therefore, *pro tanto* unjust. They are likely to exacerbate SES-based stereotypes and provide state-sanctioned support for SES-based hierarchies. They depend for their existence upon antecedent failures of FEO, with low-SES residents being interested in pursuing these opportunities but lacking the material or educational means to do so. And they perpetuate failures of FEO into the future.

5. Objections & Replies

In this section I consider two sets of objections. The first is that there are relevant differences between race and SES, such that drawing an analogy between them is misleading. The second is that skilled migration benefits low-SES residents, making the arguments in this paper counterproductive.

5.1. Disanalogies between Race- and SES

There are three disanalogies between race- and skill-selection that problematize any comparison. First, the complexities of SES suggest that the effects of skill-selection on those with low-SES will probably be less *harmful* and less *likely*. Those with low-SES are less likely to be either fully conscious of their SES or see it as interwoven with their self-conception. Second, race is a permanent status whereas SES is somewhat flexible, indicating a precarious relationship between SES and social status. And third, whereas no state can justly seek to eliminate race, just states can legitimately work to raise the SES of all low-SES residents, promoting universal education, workplace prestige, and the elimination of poverty.^{xx}

In response, I first note that the argument is *not* that skill-selection is *as* unjust as race-based policies. Rather, the claim is that the same argument applies in both cases. Insofar as skill-selection exacerbates status harms and perpetuates failures of FEO then it is *pro tanto* unjust, even if other discretionary policies are worse. The data on SES shows that status harms exist. And even if the complexities of SES mean that some will not be fully aware of the relationship between skill-selection and their status, there is sufficient reason to believe that many will recognize the message contained within, and be affected by, such policies.

Second, the flexibility of SES is a significant disanalogy. However, there are three reasons why this does not undermine the argument. First, the possibility of changing one's SES does not erase the status harms—or economic harms—associated with low-SES. Those who live with low-SES will find little comfort in this. Moreover, even those who achieve economic mobility will experience status harms before leaving low-SES and will, given its embodied nature, likely bear the physical signs of their early-life SES.^{xxi} Second, even bracketing concerns regarding the likelihood of SES-based mobility, by undermining FEO skill-selection makes this *less likely*, helping cement SES over time. Finally, the belief that SES is fluid, capable of being changed through one's efforts, is part of the harm associated with low-SES and is used to blame those with low-SES for their status. This disanalogy, therefore, points to a novel injustice of low-SES.

Finally, this is a unique form of injustice insofar as states are—unlike with race, gender, or religion—permitted to pursue the eradication of low-SES. However, we need to distinguish between two separate policies aimed at changing the percentage of low-SES residents. On the one hand, states could increase the SES of existing residents. On the other hand, they could bring in additional high-SES migrants. The former is compatible with, and supportive of, the status of low-SES citizens. The

latter, however, not only fails to benefit low-SES citizens, but also generates status harms and undermines movements towards FEO.

5.2 The Economic Interests of Low-SES Residents

I have argued that skill-selection harms low-SES residents. It reinforces status harms and, in part because of this, contributes to failures of FEO. However, it could be argued that skill-selection is still *better* for low-SES residents than alternative policies. After all, low-skill immigration has purportedly suppressed wages and increased unemployment among low-SES residents (Ypi 2008, 399). Skill-selective policies, insofar as they prevent these costs, allow the state to accommodate the claims of migrants while also addressing the needs of low-SES residents. This suggests that those worried about domestic economic justice ought to prefer skill-selection.

However, I find this argument unconvincing. In this section I argue that skill-selection is likely to be worse for low-SES citizens.^{xxii} First, the empirical data is mixed, with economists not reaching a consensus regarding the effects of low-skill migration (See Oberman 2016, 46; Sager 2020, 42-44; Higgins 2013, 52; and Song 2019, 165-166). There are serious doubts in the literature about whether it has short- or long-term negative effects on employment and wages for low-SES residents. Based on the arguments of this paper, there is a presumptive case against skill-selection. As such, without clear evidence of economic costs, we cannot justify skill-selection. This evidence has not been sufficiently provided.

Second, *even if* the economic argument is correct, the question is not whether to prioritize economic harms over status harms. Instead, it is whether to prioritize short-term economic harms over long-term economic *and* status harms.^{xxiii} If my argument is correct, skill-selection undermines progress towards FEO. Therefore, even if low-SES residents experience economic costs from low-skill migration, the economic effects are far from univocal.

By using skill-selection to avoid short-term economic costs states contribute to the generational transmission of low-SES. And while there is no guarantee that ending skill-selection would directly promote FEO, there are reasons to think that it would at least pave the way for programs that equalize opportunities. After all, not only does skill-selection facilitate the status harms that contribute to failures of FEO, but absent ready access to skilled immigration, the surest way to satisfy domestic needs involves increasing education and training opportunities for low-SES residents. Third, the negative effects of skill-selection are, I argue, of greater significance than the alleged economic costs of low-skill immigration. Social status, and its connection to self-respect, is of central

normative concern in political philosophy. Rawls, for example, lists the social bases of self-respect as being “perhaps the most important social primary good” (1971, 440). Without this, our life plans can feel empty, and we can lose the motivation to try. Serious harms to self-respect can even undermine the value of all other social primary goods. Moreover, Sennett and Cobb showed that concerns about status and dignity were more important to low-SES interviewees than the size of their paychecks. The significance of status is a consistent theme in the research on class and SES.

Social inequality also has implications for income, wealth, and employment. As above, SES-based stereotypes can affect treatment by teachers, effort by students, and success in job interviews. And individualistic ideologies can combine with these stereotypes and racial animus to undermine support for social welfare programs. Accordingly, the effects of status harms can extend well beyond self-conception and can affect one’s overall economic status.

Fourth, status harms cannot be as easily remedied by redistributive policies. If the economic arguments against low-skill migration are correct, then such policies can have local effects on wages and unemployment rates. However, as noted by Song (2019, 167) and Ypi (2018, 145), such problems can be resolved by targeted interventions and addressing existing distributive injustices. States can institute minimum wage increases, workplace protections for migrants, shifts in tax rates, increased social welfare funding, and public jobs programs.^{xxiv}

However, when social status has been undermined such strategies are unavailable. Status cannot be *directly* redistributed by the state, and public programs cannot compensate with additional respect in one area in response to a failure of respect in another. Similarly, if one is afflicted by negative SES-based stereotypes, the state cannot institute policies that compensate by promoting positive stereotypes or biases. Of course, social status is not entirely disconnected from income and wealth. Nor is it unaffected by social policy. Strategies for indirectly eliminating social hierarchies can involve working to eliminate inequalities and ensuring FEO.^{xxv} Equalizing education, resources, and access to desirable work can help remove most—if not all—of the origins of SES-based stereotypes.

However, this will not be a satisfactory solution. First, such policies have generational lag. Even if tax policies and funding for public education help undermine social hierarchies in the future, they do little to help those who suffer status harms in the present.^{xxvi} Second, such policies are rare in our non-ideal world, and their existence is rendered less likely by skill-selective policies, which contribute to negative stereotypes and biases. Therefore, compensating for the harms of skill-selection by working to eliminate the social bases of status hierarchies is unlikely to succeed. Even if such

policies can prevent future status harms, they do not remove them for residents in the present and they are less likely to be instituted if skill-selective policies are maintained.

6. Conclusion

If states have the right to discretionary control over admissions, choosing between would-be immigrants based on skill *seems* like a paradigmatic example of legitimate discrimination. It does not obviously reduce to animus or disdain. And it appears to further legitimate state interests. However, reflection shows skill-selection to be a form of indirect discrimination. Despite its apparent facial neutrality, it de-prioritizes would-be immigrants based on traits and attributes that track the markers of low-SES. Like other forms of invidious discrimination, these policies denigrate residents who are similar to the excluded.

The pernicious implications of skill-selection extend, however, beyond social status and biases. Such policies depend upon and perpetuate failures of FEO. The demand for skilled immigrants requires both a need for skilled labor *and* a dearth of qualified residents. And by cementing a system whereby skilled labor can be procured without the costs of educating and training low-SES residents, the motivation to secure domestic FEO is undermined. Generalized skill-selection is, on these bases, *pro tanto* unjust.

This is not to say, however, that states must select against skill, or that there are no circumstances under which particular professions can be prioritized. Skilled migrants can be admitted, for example, through an admissions lottery or family-reunification without affecting social status for low-SES residents. It is not their admission that contributes to SES-based biases and status harms, but their prioritization by the state over the “unskilled.” Moreover, a state dealing with a crisis—e.g., a natural disaster or pandemic—might have an unexpected need for medical professionals. Their temporary selection does not indicate a generalized preference for skill, nor does it necessarily follow from—or incentivize—failures of FEO.

High-income countries need not exclude skilled would-be immigrants to avoid wronging low-SES residents. Rather, they must only avoid discriminating against potential immigrants based on education, job experience, and affluence. The result is not the exclusion of the skilled, but an equal chance for applicants of all skill levels to be admitted.

Notes

ⁱ High-income countries are a natural focal point because they most plausibly have duties to admit would-be migrants and often receive the greatest number of petitioners. This creates a demand to admit, as well as a recognized right to exclude, *some* of those seeking entry.

ⁱⁱ To avoid erasing the harms accrued by resident non-citizens, and the duties the state bears towards them, I will use the language of ‘residents’ rather than citizens.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use the language of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ not due to sympathy for the distinction but because it tracks the dominant usage in the literature.

^{iv} These concerns only arise in sociohistorical contexts like our own. If SES no longer sets social status, or if low-SES residents no longer exist, then skill-selection might be permissible. Moreover, if low-SES residents come to recognize a division between domestic status hierarchies and immigration policies such that their social status is not implicated, and if they desired skill-selective policies based on (perceived) economic benefits, then such policies might be permissible. (I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this last point.) However, this still leaves open the possibility that low-SES residents could be harmed by skill-selection, even if they themselves endorse it.

^v According to Higgins (2013, 214), skill-selective policies often harm already (relatively) poor residents of sending countries by, for example, contributing to the brain drain.

^{vi} High-income countries are largely dependent upon immigration to satisfy domestic labor market needs. First, many of them have a disproportionately old population and need an influx of young workers. Second, dual labor market theory suggests that the need for low-skill migrant labor is a deep-seated feature of developed capitalist economies in the core (Massey et al 1993, 440-444).

^{vii} Though I reject the right of high-income countries to exercise discretionary control, I deploy this lens to reach states closer to where they are. I see this argument as supplementing, rather than conflicting with, my other views on open borders and migration (Name redacted, 2021).

^{viii} Song advocates for *admitting* low-skill immigrants. But this is not necessarily an argument against retaining a significant number of spaces for the skilled.

^{ix} This ignores any gender pay gap, such that even equally skilled and experienced women will often receive lower salaries.

^x Put differently, within each race or nationality, the less skilled are disproportionately perceived as strange and other.

^{xi} I would like to thank [name redacted] for drawing attention to this point.

^{xii} I remain agnostic as to whether *mere* denigration is unjust—or sufficiently unjust to undermine skill-selective policies. Instead, I focus on denigration that affects social status.

^{xiii} Premises one and four, after all, are relatively uncontroversial.

^{xiv} As I will discuss later, this has implications for our ability to pursue educational and training opportunities.

^{xv} Marxist approaches provide an invaluable analysis of the objective, material relationships between classes. However, this project focuses on the phenomenology of SES.

^{xvi} While MacKay (2013, 135) rightly notes that skill-selection does not tell either residents or those excluded that they are “unfit” for membership, such policies do, I argue, suggest that they are less “fit” or “desirable.”

^{xvii} A cycle particularly vicious with Black poverty.

^{xviii} Even career goals and motivation can be affected by stereotypes, expectations, and opportunities. Thus, even if low-SES residents do not have explicit desires to pursue these careers, this is still rooted in a system that fails to secure FEO.

^{xix} Ayelet Shachar (2019, 194) rightly notes that states have the power to rectify this by redirecting some of the economic benefits of skilled migration to promote domestic justice. However, my point is not that such injustices cannot be mitigated, but that skill-selection renders this less likely.

^{xx} I would like to thank an anonymous referee for the second and third points.

^{xxi} As Reed-Sandoval notes, (2000, 80), the embodied nature of SES often makes ridding ourselves of this identity unlikely, if not impossible, even if we exercise late-life ‘upward mobility’.

^{xxii} This is in addition to concerns regarding both the interests of low-skill would-be migrants and the brain drain. Accordingly, skill-selection is likely to be worse for the least-advantaged domestically and globally.

^{xxiii} According to Caleb Yong (2016, 829), we should prioritize long-term over short-term economic consequences. Even if skill-selection is better in the short-term, there is, I argue, reason to think that it is worse overall.

^{xxiv} There is something perverse in the state using existing economic injustices—injustices that it has permitted and, at times, promoted—to justify restricting the freedom of others.

^{xxv} I would like to thank [name redacted] for raising this point.

^{xxvi} The person whose body embeds their SES, and who has a severe educational deficit, cannot be made whole by policies that undermine the causes of status hierarchies.

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