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Status, power, and intergroup relations: the personal is the societal

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Hierarchies in the correlated forms of power (resources) and status (prestige) are constants that organize human societies. This article reviews relevant social psychological literature and identifies several converging results concerning power and status. Whether rank is chronically possessed or temporarily embodied, higher ranks create psychological distance from others, allow agency by the higher ranked, and exact deference from the lower ranked. Beliefs that status entails competence are essentially universal. Interpersonal interactions create warmth-competence compensatory tradeoffs. Along with societal structures (enduring inequality), these tradeoffs reinforce status-competence beliefs. Race, class, and gender further illustrate these dynamics. Although status systems are resilient, they can shift, and understanding those change processes is an important direction for future research, as global demographic changes disrupt existing hierarchies.

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‘Hierarchy may have a psychological advantage over equality in that it is familiar, rehearsed, socially efficient’ [1^{••}].

In this research example, when participants’ deliberate thinking was constrained — by increased blood alcohol, cognitive load, low-effort thought, ego depletion, or rapid responding — participants increased their endorsement of hierarchy.

Accumulating evidence such as this indicates that group power and status distinctions are relatively automatic and spontaneous, perhaps even the human default. Power and status ranking is not going away any time soon. This essay

reviews relevant recent work, focusing on how intergroup status (including race, class, and gender as exemplars) gets enacted in interpersonal encounters. In light of shifting demographics — with migration, globalization, and changing populations — the article ends by considering potential shifts in intergroup status and power in the current era.

Defining power and status

Expert consensus is clear: *Power* is asymmetrical control over resources, and *status* is social prestige [2,3[•]]. Inequality is not just about power (resources) but also about status (respect) [4]. Their empirical independence appears in several findings: Power *per se* makes people less just, but status (especially without power) makes people more just [5]. Power without status is particularly destructive, as it allows demeaning others [6]. Men disproportionately prefer power, while women disproportionately prefer status [7]; legitimacy affects the desirability of status but not power [7].

Nevertheless, in practice, power and status are often correlated. For example, people are attracted to the powerful (and attraction confers status/prestige) — but only if the powerful actually possess control and are recognized as such, enacting it by controlling the conversation and being legitimated by others [8]. As another example, social class combines power and general hierarchical rank [9^{••}].

Granted, concepts of power differ by culture [10], for example as more self-oriented or other-oriented. Power also differs by domain (e.g., workplace or domestic; [11]). Still, hierarchy beliefs do generalize across contexts [12]. Power and status are typically correlated features of the human condition, which is fundamentally ranked. Here we focus on the interpersonal enactment of intergroup rank.

Encounters across power/status

High power, and to some extent status, creates psychological distance from others [13^{••}]. Power thus leads to higher cognitive construal level, allowing the powerful to follow their dispositions [14]. Power allows people to act freely, power leading to approach motivation [15[•]]. Such approach mindsets reciprocally increase status [16]. Power allows agenda setting in intergroup encounters, for example by postponing consequential negotiations that might shift power arrangements [17,18]. Thus, power, agency, and action are intertwined.

Power manifests physically as well. Individuals can dress for status, pose powerfully, emote dominantly, and act nonverbally like a leader [19,20,21,22–25]. Groups as a whole can enact embodiments parallel to those of individuals (e.g., when the powerful group expresses dominant emotions, such as anger, their violent actions seem more legitimate; [26]). Such physical manifestations encourage the powerful in risky decisions, even dishonest ones, but they do elicit deference (even to flawed decisions), encourage legitimation, and improve job-interview performance.

Compensation effect as a function of status/power

How do people perceive others who are higher or lower in social status and power, and how do those perceptions affect their interactions and broader group dynamics? Hierarchy operates at different levels, from individual to societal, and research at these different levels helps to explain the maintenance of unequal hierarchies, despite most Americans' beliefs that society should ideally be less stratified (e.g., [27]). Status hierarchies at organizational and societal levels affect how individuals perceive social groups and individual others. At more immediate levels, such perceptions reinforce unequal societal hierarchies.

Perceived social status informs judgments of others' competence, with judgments of a group's societal status and its trait competence positively correlated at an average of .90 across countries [28]. Going beyond this apparently universal status-competence link [29], across 37 cross-national samples, people in countries with greater income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, perceive outgroup members more ambivalently, with judgments of competence but not warmth influenced by targets' status.

This tendency in more hierarchical societies to see groups more ambivalently carries weight in interpersonal interactions: Commenting on a person's high competence while omitting information about the person's interpersonal warmth (or commenting on high warmth while omitting competence information) actually implies negative standing on the omitted dimension, an ambivalent code understood by both speakers and listeners [30,31]. Relative power and status can be communicated as subtly as by referring to one group as the norm and another (otherwise equal) group as the target of comparison, with judgments of high agency and low communion tied to members of the normative (higher status) group [32]. In this way, inequality and norms of communication perpetuate stereotypes of high-status and low-status targets as respectively cold-but-competent and incompetent-but-warm.

Targets of these ambivalent stereotypes are not unaware of this coded language: In interpersonal interactions, high-status targets compensate for their stereotypic coldness by

downplaying their own competence to appear warmer, while low-status targets pursue the opposite strategy, compensating for stereotypic incompetence by downplaying their own warmth to appear more competent ([33], see also Yzerbyt, this issue). When status-based stereotypes have a positive side, such as strength in academics at a higher-status school or strength in athletics at a lower-status school, higher-status and lower-status individuals stake their claim to these strengths, while judging their outgroup peers as weaker on the ingroup-favoring dimension [34,35].

In addition to downplaying stereotypic incompetence and bolstering their comparative strengths, lower-status people show in-group favoritism in allocating resources to improve their group's standing [36,37]. Leaders recognize this threat posed by a unified lower-status group, and actually undermine their highly-skilled subordinates' group cohesion to maintain the status quo [38]. Dominance-oriented leaders threatened by competent underlings will restrict their subordinates' communications with each other, physically sequester them, and discourage their bonding. The subordinates' competence would be threatening because it runs against a stereotypic lower-status role.

Whether negative or positive, ambivalent status-based stereotypes are ingrained in hierarchies and perpetuated at the interpersonal level. Ironically, individuals' need for order and control, and their system-justifying ideologies, can combine with status stereotypes to reinforce inequality as desirable and legitimate [39,40]. The resulting cycle in which inequality strengthens status stereotypes, and status stereotypes legitimize inequality, seems hard to break.

Race, gender, and class as exemplars

Social group membership is often confounded with social status. Regarding race, both Black and White participants implicitly and explicitly associate Black targets with low-status positions and White targets with high-status positions [41]. Such race-status associations predict Blacks' status seeking and Whites' status keeping. Recent work has explored how difficult it can be to cross this implied status gap. Even well intentioned Whites struggle to do so. Whites high in the desire to affiliate with racial minorities are nevertheless unable to accurately understand minority strangers or even roommates [42]. Further, egalitarian Whites tend to present less competence to Black interaction partners than to White interaction partners, engaging in patronizing self-presentation, to appear warmer, despite endorsing socially liberal ideologies [43]. White Democratic Presidential candidates also do this to minority audiences, more than do White Republican ones [42]. Perceptions of cross-race partners as dissimilar or anxious may hinder the ability to cross the implied status gap when interacting with racial outgroup members [44].

Likewise, a recent surge in social-class research has explored how social class is closely associated with social status. A rank-based perspective on social class [45] suggests that people use social class as a tool to compare their own social standing to others. Varying social-class environments socialize differently and produce different cultural experiences. This sociocultural perspective suggests that psychological and behavioral outcomes follow not only from perceived rank, but also from the resources, ideas, perspectives, and institutions encountered over time in different social classes [46]. For example, members of the upper class tend to express more narcissistic behavior (as a function of entitlement) and act more selfishly than do those of lower social classes [47,48]. High status in general allows both adults and children to act less pro-socially than do lower-status people [49].

Finally, gender also reflects perceptions of power and social status. The stereotypes applied to men as the dominant, higher-status group worldwide reflect cultural values in their specific manifestation. In the U.S., a nation that values individualism, men are seen as more individualistic than women; in South Korea, a nation that values collectivism, men are seen as more collectivistic than women [50]. Work on gender in management and business reflects this implied status gap. For example, people in leadership positions are more willing to relinquish power to men than to women [51].

Shifting power and status

Power and status are not static features of social hierarchies, as evidenced by a growing body of research that has identified some of the catalysts involved in social change. Social change does not require merely decreasing unpleasant or awkward intergroup interactions. For example, asymmetries in fair access to resources leads disadvantaged groups to push for discussing inequality — while advantaged groups, although potentially well intentioned, try to avoid focusing on intergroup differences [18]. These discordant strategies frequently maintain the status quo, as the powerful group fails to address issues of intergroup disparities for the sake of avoiding conflict. Such motivational discrepancies may be at play in intergroup negotiations, institutional change, and everyday interactions (for a review, see [18]).

To be sure, status does shift for those individuals or groups who do move up or down the social hierarchy. For example, new majorities, especially those low in perceived control over their status, may abuse their power more than do established majorities, favoring their in-group and derogating new minorities [52].

Even the potential for change in the hierarchy has wide-ranging consequences for intergroup relations. The salience of demographic information predicting that minorities will become the majority in the United States links to

Whites' greater support for conservative policies [20,21]. And racial minorities' social progress is associated with greater perceived anti-White bias (i.e., perceiving an interracial zero-sum game) by those Whites who see the hierarchy as legitimate [53]. Both of these effects may operate through an increase in perceived threat, stronger at the physiological level (e.g., cardiovascular response) for members of powerful groups [54].

Future research will doubtless continue exploring these topics and grow to include the study of more subtle changes in social hierarchies. Promising areas of inquiry include research on the exclusion of ambiguous targets from high-status ingroups (e.g., multiracials; [55]) and on the differential effects of subjective (i.e., context-dependent) and objective status on intergroup relations (e.g., [56]).

Conclusions

Societal status and power hierarchies endure and have some apparently universal cross-rank dynamics: Power and status create psychological distance, conferring agency at the top and requiring deference at the bottom. Status conveys competence, although it tends to tradeoff against lower warmth. This warmth-competence compensation appears in encounters across status, race, gender, and class. Societies with more inequality are especially likely to position social groups as stereotypically high on one dimension and low on the other.

At the same time, demographic change also predicts shifts in which groups will occupy which status/power roles. The majority group will become merely one group among many groups, no longer dominating by their sheer numbers. With migration and differential birth rates, different ethnic groups and nationalities will become more or less numerically powerful, locally and globally. Gender role changes will continue to alter the societal ranking of men and women. The more we know about societal, group, and personal responses to the inevitable hierarchy upheavals, the fewer surprises our societies will encounter, and quite possibly, thoughtful planning for demographic change will reduce intergroup conflict and make us all the safer.

Conflict of interest

Nothing declared.

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