

Title of Entry: Higher status in groups

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Synonyms: Social Rank, Social Status, Sociometric Status, Social Hierarchy, Power, Dominance, Prestige, Informal Leadership.

Definitions: Social status refers to differential degrees of social influence and rank in relation to other group members. This definition is used in the current entry. Note, however, that variations in definition exist across disciplines (and sometimes subfields): in some areas of research, for instance, social status is used to describe freely conferred deference or prestige, in contrast to the use of the term here to refer to more general influence that may or may not be associated with respect or prestige.

Introduction

From the most egalitarian societies to the formal organization of contemporary businesses, human groups are inherently structured by social hierarchy (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2017; Mazur, 1985; Von Rueden, 2014). That is, differentiation in social rank—defined as relative position within a social hierarchy based on social influence and agency (Báles, Strodbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Morris Zelditch, 1980)—is persistently observed within and between groups. The ubiquity of social hierarchy and rank differentiation likely emerged because hierarchies ease the tensions between competing group members who may

have conflicting goals, and thus facilitates effective collective action and reduces the frequency of agonistic conflicts (Anderson & Willer, 2014). Such rank differentiation is characterized by two dimensions: power and social status (See Blader & Chen, 2014 for a review).

Power generally refers to institutionally legitimized and endorsed influence that is characterized by an individual's ability to influence others through fear and harnessing control over resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Social status, on the other hand, refers to informal rank and influence that can be achieved by those who lack formal power or institutional roles. Power and social status have distinct antecedents and divergent consequences for both individuals and groups (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). The current entry will, however, focus solely on the antecedents and consequences of having higher social status in human groups.

Social status in human groups can either be freely conferred to respected and admired individuals by other group members, or coercively imposed on group members by a forceful, aggressive and manipulative individual. These two often distinct forms of social status are underpinned by individual differences in prestige and dominance within a group (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010). Moreover, social status (also termed *sociometric status*) is conceptualized differently to *socioeconomic status*, which is characterized by an individual's occupational status, educational attainment and income (Adler et al., 1994).

The antecedents of higher social status

Freely Conferred status

Freely conferred social status is allocated to individuals by others within their group. Unlike power and coercively imposed status, freely conferred status is highly dependent on the collective perceptions of group members about an individual's instrumental value in a respected cultural domain (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Leary, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2014). There is often consensus among group members in judgements of an individual's social status (Mast & Hall, 2004) and those high in social status are often conferred considerable influence over group decision-making (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). As freely conferred status is granted by others, it is an inherently relational process. More specifically, an individual can only be high in status when those around them exhibit deference, and thus social status is not a characteristic of the individual, but the property of a dyad or group (Bunderson, Van Der Vegt, Cantimur, & Rink, 2016; Emerson, 1962).

Individuals often confer social status to those who they perceive to have an ability to confer benefits to group members. Those who provide skills (i.e., making effective arrowheads), expertise (i.e. botanical knowledge for medicinal practices), and exhibit traits that signpost physical ability (i.e. physical strength and size) are often granted higher social status in their groups (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009a; Von Rueden, Gurven, & Kaplan, 2008). These abilities and expertise are often associated with narrower personality traits and individual differences—such as extraversion, conscientiousness and openness—that may motivate the accrual of such skills. Prestige is also associated with agreeableness and genuine self-esteem, which may also help individuals prosocially monitor and maintain their social standing within groups (Cheng et al., 2010). All of the aforementioned traits and abilities are important for a group's success and survival (Ellis, 1994), help to establish hierarchical relationships based on respect and admiration, and comprise a *prestige* profile (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). This prestige profile is associated with social or cultural learning, whereby the traits that signpost

prestige highlight an individual's propensity as a teacher (or so-called learning model) to observers (so-called *info-copiers*), who in turn aim to maintain proximity and seek advice from that individual (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Through this learning process, the individual high in prestige may confer adaptive skill or knowledge to the info-copier—such as how to produce a usable arrowhead—and thus facilitate that individual's own goal accomplishment (Barkow, 1975).

Acquiring social status through prestige is not only reliant on an individual's ability, but also their willingness, to bestow benefits to others. Experimental evidence suggests that those who contribute most generously achieve the highest levels of social status within a group (Barclay, 2013; Willer, 2009). These acts of generosity and cooperation may effectively broadcast an honest signal of an individual's prestige (see Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). More specifically, by signaling generosity and cooperative intent, high prestige individuals relinquish valued resources—be they informational or material—that will benefit other group members and further signal their quality within their group. In return, the individuals receiving the signal freely confer deference to their high-prestige counterpart and further elevate that individual's social status within the group (Boone 1998; Gintis et al, 2001; Roberts 1998). Indeed, a large and growing body of empirical evidence suggests that the most capable individuals who are willing to provide benefits are allocated the highest social status across many small-scale societies (Sugiyama & Sugiyama, 2003; Wiessner, 2005), among North American task groups (Cheng et al., 2013; Lukaszewski, Simmons, Anderson, & Roney, 2016), and also during development (Hawley, 2002; Redhead, 2016).

Coercively Imposed Status

In some circumstances, individuals may achieve social status through coercion and cost imposition. Individuals acquire such coercively imposed status through dominance, which related to an individual's ability and willingness to inflict costs on others (see Redhead, Cheng, & O'Gorman, 2019 for a detailed overview). Unlike freely conferred status, coercively imposed status is not the property of the group. More specifically, it is not granted through a process whereby group members collectively agree upon an individual's social value to the group. Rather, individuals defer to their high dominance counterparts in an attempt to lessen the costs that the individual high in dominance may impose on them, even if they may not necessarily wish to. Thus, such coercively imposed status is underpinned by fear (Cheng et al., 2013, 2010). Without such fear, an individual's coercively imposed status would diminish. In many contexts there are a several mechanisms characteristic of human groups that lessen the efficacy of dominance, such as the ability of group members to form coalitions (Boehm, 2009; Redhead et al., 2019).

Often dominance is related to power. Those who have disproportionate control over a group's resources and are willing employ coercive tactics to attain their egocentric goals, are more able to leverage such control and successfully spread fear among proximate others (Mazur, 1985; Wrangham, 1980). In addition, there is variability in the efficacy of dominance's association with social status (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009b). In most social groups, dominance typically has no substantial relationship, or a negative relationship, with prestige (Cheng et al., 2010; Redhead, 2016). However, in some contexts, dominance and prestige may be positively related. For example, in groups and cultures whereby an ability to inflict harm is respected (i.e. during development, in delinquent gangs, prison populations), dominance may have a positive association with both prestige and higher social status in groups (Hawley, 1999; Redhead, Cheng, & O'Gorman, 2018). More broadly, individuals may at times both

respect and fear their superiors (Barkow, 2014). This relationship has received scarce empirical investigation and provides a fruitful platform for future investigation.

The consequences of higher social status

There are abounding benefits of having higher status in groups. First, evidence from various societies indicates that those high in both freely conferred and coercively imposed status have greater access to sexual resources (Alden Smith, 2004; von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016) and have lower offspring mortality (von Rueden, Gurven, & Kaplan, 2010). Those high in freely conferred status are attractive as long-term sexual partners, while those high in coercively imposed status are more attractive short-term partners (Kruger & Fitzgerald, 2011).

Complimentary to this, individuals perceived as contributing more to the goals of a group—and thus attaining positions of higher social status—are perceived as more physically attractive by their lower-status counterparts (Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2004), and individuals perceive the leaders of their in-group as more physically attractive in comparison to leaders of an outgroup (Kniffin, Wansink, Griskevicius & Sloan Wilson, 2014). Alongside these, high status individuals tend to have higher numbers of allies and cooperative partners (Patton, 2005; Von Rueden et al., 2008), and have privileged access to a group's valued or scarce resources (Ellis, 1994). It seems that having high social status increases an individual's overall fitness (Wiessner, 2005), and may be considered a fundamental human motive (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Barkow, 1989).

Having high social status also has a positive impact on the health and subjective well-being of individuals. Among the Tsimane forager-horticulturalist of Bolivia, individuals higher in status had greater nutritional health (Reyes-Garcia et al., 2008). Across cultures, individuals who feel more respected are higher in life satisfaction and positive affect (Tay & Diener,

2011). Evidence also suggests that, during adolescence, individuals low in prestige are more likely to be bullied (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009) and adolescent girls who are perceived as leaders are also perceived as being happier (Weisfeld, Bloch, & Bloch, 1984). Moreover, individuals high in freely conferred status are less likely to exhibit poor mental (i.e. depression: (Cooper et al., 2010) and physiological health (Ghaed & Gallo, 2007) than their lower status counterparts. There are, however, several negative consequences of coercively imposed status (see Redhead et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Differentiation in social status seems universal for human groups. Individuals are granted positions of high social status by members of their groups through prestige, a profile grounded by an individual's ability and willingness to confer benefits to others, and dominance, which is centered on the ability and willingness to inflict harm on others. Overall, there are many benefits related to high social status in groups.

Cross-References

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