A JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE APS

The Pursuit of Status in Social Groups

Cameron Anderson and Gavin J. Kilduff

University of California, Berkeley

ABSTRACT—*Status differences are ubiquitous and highly consequential. Yet with regard to human social groups, basic questions persist about how status differences develop. In particular, little is known about the processes by which individuals pursue status in social groups. That is, how do individuals compete and jockey for status with their peers? The current paper reviews recent research that helps fill this gap in our knowledge. Specifically, studies of a variety of face-to-face groups show that individuals pursue status by enhancing the apparent value they provide to their group. Individuals compete for status not by bullying and intimidating others, as some theorists have proposed, but by behaving in ways that suggest high levels of competence, generosity, and commitment to the group.*

KEYWORDS—*status; status striving; hierarchy; power; groups*

Status differences are considered universal across social-living species, from nonhuman animals to all known human groups. The implications of achieving high status in one's group are profound. Those higher in the social order tend to have more access to scarce resources; receive more social support; and enjoy better physical health, a longer life span, and better reproductive success (Ellis, 1994).

Although social scientists have long been interested in how status differences develop in groups, there is still much about the process of status differentiation that is not well understood. In particular, how do group members pursue status and compete with each other for higher social standing? The pursuit of status is thought to be pervasive in social groups (Hogan, 1983), yet little work has systematically examined the behaviors or strategies that individuals employ to improve their standing vis-à-vis their peers.

Address correspondence to Cameron Anderson, Haas School of Business, 545 Student Services Bldg. #1900, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-1900; e-mail: anderson@haas.berkeley.edu.

Recent studies have begun to fill this lacuna. Studies examining status striving in a variety of face-to-face groups, or groups in which members interact directly, have converged on the same general finding: Individuals pursue status by enhancing the apparent value they provide to the group. Individuals do not attain status by bullying and intimidating others, as some theorists have asserted, but by acting confidently, which suggests superior task competence, or by acting generously toward others, which suggests a strong commitment to the group. We review and synthesize some of these recent findings and propose a new model of status differentiation in groups.

THE FUNCTIONAL BASIS OF STATUS DIFFERENCES

Status in face-to-face groups is defined as an individual's prominence, respect, and influence in the eyes of others. According to functionalist theories, an individual's status is based on the group's collective judgments about where he or she deserves to rank in the hierarchy (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). That is, the group develops an implicit consensus as to which individual characteristics are valuable and allocates status based on the extent to which the individual possesses these characteristics (Berger et al., 1972). For example, in hunter-gatherer tribes, status is given to individuals with superior hunting skills, because those skills are critical for the group's survival and success (Ellis, 1994). This system of status allocation is thought to serve a number of functions for the group, such as giving decision-making responsibilities to the most qualified members.

The functionalist perspective of status has received ample empirical support. For example, the two main individual characteristics that groups tend to value—competence and a strong commitment to the group—are consistent predictors of status. Individuals who possess superior abilities related to the group's tasks and who have strong social/leadership abilities achieve higher status (e.g., Berger et al., 1972; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986), as do those with a strong communal orientation and a willingness to make sacrifices for the collective (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006).

Copyright © 2009 Association for Psychological Science

CURRENT DIRECTIONS in Psychological Science

HOW DO INDIVIDUALS PURSUE STATUS IN GROUPS?

Although much evidence supports the functionalist account of status, there are some recurring findings that do not seem easily explained by it. In particular, an abundance of research has shown that individual characteristics related to status striving are strong predictors of status in groups. For example, an aggregated analysis of 85 years of groups research found that the personality trait dominance, which involves a preference for possessing authority and the tendency to behave assertively, predicts who emerges as the leader in groups more consistently than any other individual-difference dimension examined, including intelligence (Lord et al., 1986). Further, individual differences such as the need for power and self-monitoring, which are also associated with a desire for high social standing, similarly predict the attainment of higher status across group settings (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; Winter, 1988).

From a functionalist perspective, it is not clear why these characteristics lead to higher status. Individual differences such as dominance and the need for power are not socially valued, and they are largely uncorrelated with competence or communal orientation (e.g., see Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Furthermore, it does not seem to be the case that status-striving individuals achieve high status by bullying and intimidating others. Prior work has shown that groups often punish members who try to take high-status positions by force and aggression (Ridgeway & Diekeman, 1989) or try to claim higher status than the group believes they deserve (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006).

GAINING STATUS BY ENHANCING ONE'S VALUE

So how do these individuals who strive for status succeed in attaining it? What behaviors or strategies do they employ to improve their standing? Recent studies suggest that they rise in status primarily by enhancing their value in the eyes of fellow group members—that is, by acting in ways that signal task competence, generosity, and commitment to the group. In some cases, status seekers merely give the appearance of possessing these valued characteristics; in others, they behave in ways that actually provide more value to the group. We review this evidence below.

Enhancing Apparent Competence

First, our own recent work suggests that individuals who pursue status can achieve it by behaving in ways that convey high task competence. In a recent study of task-focused teams, we found that dominant individuals were perceived by teammates as more competent, which led them to achieve higher status and influence (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Strikingly, this occurred even though dominant individuals were actually no more competent than others on average. For example, among teams working on math problems, dominant individuals did not have higher scores on standardized math tests, nor did they provide more accurate answers during the group task. Yet they were still perceived as more quantitatively skilled by teammates.

To examine how dominant individuals conveyed superior competence even when they lacked it, we examined videotape of the group sessions and analyzed each person's behavior. We discovered that dominant individuals exhibited more outward signals of competence, such as volunteering answers and providing problem-relevant information. Therefore, although dominant individuals were not actually any more competent than others in their group, they came across as more competent because they took initiative and conveyed confidence in their abilities (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009).

Enhancing Apparent Commitment to the Group

Other recent work suggests that individuals pursuing status can also attain it by signaling their commitment to the group through displays of selflessness. Research on *social dilemma* situations has demonstrated the status benefits of selfless behavior (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009). For example, in a typical study of social dilemmas, researchers give group members an initial endowment (e.g., $5) and give them the choice of either keeping their endowment or contributing it to a public fund. Participants are told that after all members make their decisions, the public fund will be increased (e.g., doubled) and then redistributed to all group members equally. In purely economic terms, it would seem rational for individuals to selfishly keep their endowments while hoping for their teammates to contribute to the public fund. However, studies have discovered a not-so-obvious benefit of generosity: Individuals who contribute more to the public fund are perceived as more committed to the group, and are thus afforded higher status and influence (Willer, 2009).

Accordingly, status seekers may engage in what has been referred to as "competitive altruism," in which they attempt to outdo others in their generosity (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). For instance, in recent studies of work organizations and university cohorts, researchers used self- and peer-ratings to measure the degree to which individuals provided work-related assistance to one another (Flynn et al., 2006). They found that individuals who were more motivated to achieve high status provided help to more of their fellow group members but sought help from fewer others. This seemingly selfless behavior led to them being perceived as more generous in their groups and in turn led to higher status. Therefore, individuals who sought status attained it by acting strategically with regard to giving and receiving help. By providing more help than they received, these individuals displayed a communal orientation that increased their value to the collective.

Developing More Social Connections

Studies also suggest that status seekers enhance their social standing by developing a wider range of relationships with other

group members. We recently examined the emergence of reputations among students in negotiation classes (Anderson & Shirako, 2008). At the beginning of the semester, we measured the preexisting social ties among the students, or how many of their classmates each individual already knew. Throughout the semester, students then negotiated with each other in a series of bargaining tasks. We assessed how cooperatively each student behaved based on their negotiated agreements and on ratings from their negotiation partners. At the end of the class, we then collected peer nominations to assess whether students had attained reputations for cooperativeness (again, a highly valued characteristic that helps determine individual status).

We found that the extent to which cooperative individuals developed a positive reputation depended heavily on how socially connected they were before the class began. Only the cooperative behavior of well-connected individuals was widely recognized; the cooperative behavior of less connected individuals generally went unnoticed. This interaction effect is illustrated in Figure 1. (It is also worth noting that socially connected individuals who behaved more selfishly were similarly more likely to gain a negative reputation. Thus both their positive and negative behavior received more attention from others.)

Why was social connectedness so important for reputation? Within larger social groups, it may be easy for individuals to get "lost in the crowd," and for their positive characteristics and behaviors to go unnoticed (Anderson & Shirako, 2008). Thus it may not be enough to act competently and selflessly within larger groups. Individuals must also overcome potential anonymity and increase their visibility by developing ties with fellow group members. These findings help explain why extraverts and those high in the need for power consistently attain status within larger social groups, as they tend to draw more attention to themselves and develop a wider range of social relationships (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Winter, 1988).

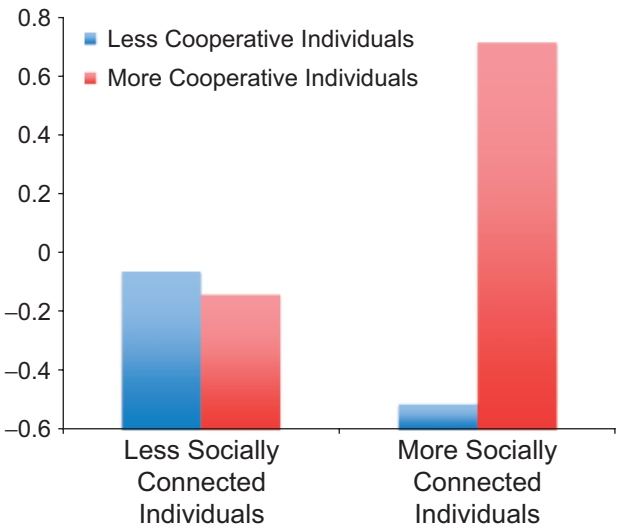

Fig. 1. Reputation for cooperativeness as a function of cooperative behavior and social connectedness.

A BROADER VIEW OF STATUS DIFFERENTIATION

The studies reviewed here represent some of the first systematic examinations of status striving in social groups. Though they focused on a range of groups and behaviors and stemmed from many different literatures, they all converged on the same overarching idea: Individuals pursue status by enhancing the apparent value they provide to the group. In addition to informing us about the nature of status striving, this work suggests a more nuanced model of status differentiation in groups—one that provides an important role for the individual pursuit of status. That is, while groups ultimately decide the status order and base it on each individual's apparent value, status-seeking individuals can ascend hierarchies by behaving in ways that make them appear more competent, generous, and committed to the group's success. Status differences are thus a product of the group's judgments about who possesses valued characteristics, as well as the individual's desire for and pursuit of higher standing.

How does this model of status differentiation apply, if at all, to nonhuman species? At first glance, it might seem unique to humans because status in nonhuman animals is so often based on physical strength and dominance (Schjelderup-Ebbe, 1935). However, in many nonhuman species such as those close to us in the phylogenetic tree (e.g., chimpanzees), status can depend not just on the ability to intimidate others but also on the ability to contribute to group functioning. For example, high-status group members resolve conflicts between lower-ranked animals, provide close protection for mothers with infants, and take a central role in defense against predators (e.g., de Waal, 1989). Status in many nonhuman species can also depend on the ability to form alliances with other group members, just as it does in humans (Byrne & Whiten, 1988). Therefore, there is reason to believe that similar value-signaling processes could occur in some nonhuman species—in particular, those where status depends at least partially on the ability to contribute to group success.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This model of status differentiation inspires a number of questions for future research. For example, some of the studies we reviewed suggested that individuals can attain higher status by making themselves appear more valuable to the group even if they are not (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). In contrast, other studies suggested that individuals seeking status actually behave in more socially valuable ways (e.g., Flynn et al., 2006), such as behaving more generously. Thus, one important question is this: What are the personal or social-contextual factors that lead status seekers to merely manage their image versus actually provide more value to their group?

Future research should also investigate some other specific strategies that status seekers use. For example, some scholars have suggested that individuals sometimes inflate the impor-

tance of their specific attributes to attain higher status ("What the group needs in a leader is experience and I have been around the longest"; Owens & Sutton, 2002). Others have shown a link between status and the expression of emotions such as anger (Tiedens, 2001), suggesting that status seekers might also boost their standing by regulating their emotional displays (Clark, 1990).

It is also important to consider the implications of this model of status striving for real-world arenas such as work organizations and electoral politics. Given that certain behaviors can convey higher competence in the absence of actual expertise (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), successful status maneuvering might result in the promotion of less qualified individuals to positions of leadership. In a sense, the "wrong" people might take charge, potentially hampering group decision making and performance.

Finally, given the apparently subjective and malleable nature of value perceptions, disagreements could arise among group members as to who is higher in status, which could also disrupt group functioning—an issue we are currently examining (Kilduff & Anderson, 2009). Overall, the recent work we have reviewed sheds some light on the nature of status striving and why it predicts status, and suggests a nuanced model of status organization that is rich with important implications and future research possibilities.

Recommended Reading

Anderson, C., & Kilduff, G. (2009). (See References). An examination of how status-seeking individuals attain higher status through conveying higher competence.

Flynn, F.J., Reagans, R.E., Amanatullah, E.T., & Ames, D.R. (2006). (See References). An examination of strategic generosity by status seekers.

Berger, J., Cohen, B.P., & Zelditch, M. (1972). (See References). A review of research on task groups that supports of the functionalist model of status.

REFERENCES

Anderson, C., John, O.P., Keltner, D., & Kring, A.M. (2001). Who attains social status? Effects of personality traits and physical attractiveness in social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 116–132.

Anderson, C., & Kilduff, G.J. (2009). Why do dominant personalities attain influence in face-to-face groups? The competence-signaling effects of trait dominance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*, 491–503.

Anderson, C., & Shirako, A. (2008). Are individuals' reputations related to their history of behavior? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*, 320–333.

Anderson, C., Srivastava, S., Beer, J., Spataro, S.E., & Chatman, J.A. (2006). Knowing your place: Self-perceptions of status in social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *91*, 1094–1110.

Berger, J., Cohen, B.P., & Zelditch, M. (1972). Status characteristics and social interaction. *American Sociological Review*, *37*, 241–255.

Byrne, R.W., & Whiten, A. (1988). *Machiavellian intelligence*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Clark, C. (1990). Emotions and micropolitics in everyday life: Some patterns and paradoxes of "place." In T.D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 305–333). Stony Brook: State University of New York Press.

de Waal, F.B.M. (1989). *Chimpanzee politics: Power and sex among apes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ellis, L. (1994). *Social stratification and socioeconomic inequality, Vol. 2: Reproductive and interpersonal aspects of dominance and status*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Flynn, F.J., Reagans, R.E., Amanatullah, E.T., & Ames, D.R. (2006). Helping one's way to the top: Self-monitors achieve status by helping others and knowing who helps whom. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *91*, 1123–1137.

Hardy, C.L., & Van Vugt, M. (2006). Nice guys finish first: The competitive altruism hypothesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 1402–1413.

Hogan, R. (1983). A socioanalytic theory of personality. In M. Page (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation, 1982: Personality-Current theory and research* (pp. 163–179). New York: Guilford.

Kilduff, G.J., & Anderson, C. (2009). *Status disagreement: When pairs of group members both think that they have higher status*. Manuscript in preparation.

Lord, R.G., De Vader, C.L., & Alliger, G.M. (1986). A meta-analysis of the relation between personality traits and leadership perceptions: An application of validity generalization procedures. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *71*, 402–410.

Owens, D.A., & Sutton, R.I. (2002). Status contests in meetings: Negotiating the informal order. In M.E. Turner (Ed.), *Groups at work: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 25–35). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ridgeway, C.L., & Diekeman, D. (1989). Dominance and collective hierarchy formation in male and female task groups. *American Sociological Review*, *54*, 79–93.

Schjelderup-Ebbe, T. (1935). Social behavior of birds. In C. Murchison (Ed.), *A handbook of social psychology, volume 2* (pp. 947–972). New York: Russell and Russell.

Tiedens, L.Z. (2001). Anger and advancement versus sadness and subjugation: The effects of negative emotion expressions on social status conferral. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*, 86–94.

Willer, R. (2009). Groups reward individual sacrifice: The status solution to the collective action problem. *American Sociological Review*, *74*, 23–43.

Winter, D.G. (1988). The power motive in women–and men. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 510–519.