

HOW STATUS SHAPES SOCIAL COGNITION: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE, “THE STATUS OF STATUS: VISTAS FROM SOCIAL COGNITION”

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Research on social status, defined as “a person’s relative position in a social hierarchy” (Swencionis & Fiske, this issue) or as “respect, admiration, and importance in the eyes of others” (Gregg, Mahadevan, & Sedikides, this issue), has proliferated. Alongside an enduring fascination with basic, general processes associated with status, researchers have increasingly been addressing the effects of status in ecological settings. Complementing this trend, the special issue (“The Status of Status: Vistas from Social Cognition”) asks: How do resources that often accompany status, such as socioeconomic standing and power, impact self-regulation and social cognition in daily life? How do people negotiate status in interpersonal encounters, and how do status-related needs affect political behavior? How do high-status individuals respond to others? Six articles contribute relevant theoretical and empirical insights.

Shah, Zhao, Mullainathan, and Shafir (this issue) focus on low-status persons, and in particular the poor. People can be attuned to several dimensions of daily experience, such as social, emotional, temporal, or financial. Shah et al. propose that lower-income (relative to higher-income) persons are overly attuned to the financial dimension. Out of necessity, their minds are occupied by money-related cognitions. For example, thoughts about the cost of various commodities are activated spontaneously, in the absence of monetary cues, and are readily triggered upon pondering daily experiences that entail an economic dimension (e.g., hanging out with friends while discussing the purchase of a bottle of wine to celebrate a birthday). Once triggered, monetary thoughts are unceasing: Lower-income (compared to higher-income) persons have greater difficulty suppressing thoughts about the cost of a mundane event, such as driving. In addition, lower-income

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persons cognitively organize incoming information (i.e., words) according to the construct “money” as opposed to a control construct (“man”). Although higher-income persons perceive the cost-related words as relatively disconnected, lower-income persons interconnect them strongly under their primary concern, money.

Giacomin, Battaglini, and Rule (this issue) are concerned with the attraction to status. Narcissism, characterized by grandiosity, is strongly linked with a desire for status (here: fame or celebrity). These authors examine contingencies underlying narcissistic attraction to status. Narcissists, they find, are highly motivated to become a celebrity (i.e., social media user), and distance themselves from individuals who have no desire for fame, and distance themselves even more from individuals who desired fame but fail to attain it. Narcissists’ intense dislike for “failure at fame” individuals may be due to self-threat. Further, Giacomin et al. find that narcissists report wanting to be like high-status others (i.e., celebrities, CEOs) only when they perceive these individuals as similar (rather than dissimilar) to themselves. In all, narcissists are keenly aware of status contingencies: They pursue status strategically, that is, when they feel it is attainable.

Gregg, Mahadevan, and Sedikides (this issue) continue on the theme of high status. In general, people have a proclivity to derogate (i.e., evaluate harshly) their ideological opponents. Is this proclivity moderated by status? These authors find that it is. Somewhat counterintuitively, high-status persons derogate their ideological opponents less, not more, than low-status persons. Further, high-status persons do so, due to feeling more confident and less intimidated while arguing, what Gregg et al. call rhetoric handling prowess.

Swencionis and Fiske (this issue) put the Gregg et al. findings in context. To facilitate social interaction, high-status persons strive to appear similar to low-status persons. Indeed, high-status students (i.e., those enrolled in more prestigious universities) do not disclose their academic affiliations when their prospective interactant is low in status, although they do so when the interactant is high in status. There is another, more subtle way to appear similar: by disconfirming stereotypes of high-status persons as being cold (than warm) and low-status persons as being incompetent (than competent). Indeed, persons with high (induced) status present themselves to low-status interactants as warm; that is, they behave more cooperatively toward them.

The dimension of warmth plays out in the political arena, as Tan and Kraus (this issue) demonstrate. Low-status (here: lower-class) persons are particularly attuned to others. As such, they will be especially sensitive in their evaluations of politicians who attempt to communicate warmth. In support of this idea, low-status persons (relative to high-status or higher-class persons) consider a political candidate attempting to convey warmth as less worthy of their trust and support. Further, low-status persons report trust and support for a political candidate whose warmth is conveyed via a low-status rather than a high-status individual.

Finally, Deng, Guinote, and Cui (this issue) disentangle power (i.e., control over another’s outcomes or resources) from status. In particular, they qualify the principle that lack of power prompts activation of the behavioral inhibition system. They find that this principle holds true only for persons who are low in status on

dimensions relevant to powerlessness. For example, only powerless persons who are concerned with losing status on a power-related dimension (e.g., competence) experience an activation of the behavior inhibition system. Put otherwise, high status appears to serve as a buffer against lack of power.

The six special issue articles raise and address pressing questions about the relevance of status for social cognition. The collective findings indicate that low social standing is a burden that takes priority in self-regulation, the content of everyday thoughts, and the ways one relates to the broader social context. Whether low social class in general, financial scarcity in particular, or poor performance on tasks under precarious control, all trigger the monitoring of unmet needs associated with one's social position. Low social standing induces a sense of threat and triggers concerns about one's ability to cope with limited resources, while decreasing trust in the political system.

Yet the findings also indicate that individuals in low-status positions cope proactively with their predicament. They rely on inner resources (e.g., capabilities) or on close relations (e.g., others in a similar position) to restore a sense of efficacy in the social world. Conversely, high status can act as a buffer against the need to defend the self when facing opponents or highlighting one's privileged position in interpersonal encounters with low-status persons, except perhaps for situations that entail status competition or for certain individuals (e.g., narcissists). We hope that the plurality of ideas, methodologies, and findings of the special issue articles prove generative.

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