The Origins of Deference: When Do People Prefer Lower Status?

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Although the desire for high status is considered universal, prior research suggests individuals often opt for lower status positions. Why would anyone favor a position of apparent disadvantage? In 5 studies, we found that the broad construct of status striving can be broken up into two conceptions: one based on rank, the other on respect. While individuals might universally desire high levels of respect, we find that they vary widely in the extent to which they strive for high-status rank, with many individuals opting for middle- or low-status rank. The status rank that individuals preferred depended on their self-perceived value to the group: when they believed they provided less value, they preferred lower status rank. Mediation and moderation analyses suggest that beliefs about others' expectations were the primary driver of these effects. Individuals who believed they provided little value to their group inferred that others expected them to occupy a lower status position. Individuals in turn conformed to these perceived expectations, accepting lower status rank in such settings.

Keywords: status, hierarchy, rank, defer, motives

High social status comes with a wealth of social, material, and psychological benefits. Individuals with higher status enjoy more prestige and respect in the eyes of others (Sherif, White, & Harvey, 1955), more autonomy and control (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980), greater access to scarce resources (Savin-Williams, 1979), elevated self-esteem (Barkow, 1975) and better mental and physical health (N. Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Marmot, 2004).

Correspondingly, the desire for high status is widely considered a universal human motive. Maslow (1943) spoke of a fundamental longing for prestige and social esteem. Evolutionary theorists have argued the desire for status is an evolved adaptation, important for ascending the hierarchy as a means to secure resources (e.g., Barkow, 1975; Buss, 1999). Happiness researchers have suggested citizens of all countries exhibit a need for respect (e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011).

Perplexingly, however, some research suggests that people commonly favor *lower* status positions. For example, a substantial proportion of participants in prior studies chose lower status roles in a hypothetical business scenario (Schmid Mast, Hall, & Schmid, 2010; Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2008). Josephs, Sellers, Newman, & Mehta, (2006) found that many individuals felt more comfortable when placed in low-status positions, and became distressed when put in positions of higher status. Closely related research on the need for power suggests some people actively avoid power and status (e.g., Winter & Stewart, 1983).

These counterintuitive findings spur a number of questions. First, do individuals sometimes actually prefer lower status? The aforementioned results provide suggestive evidence, obtained by asking individuals about hypothetical groups, but leave open the question of whether some individuals might prefer lower status in actual groups. Second, if some individuals do in fact prefer lower status, does this refute the notion that humans universally desire high status? Third, why would anyone prefer lower status, given the vast rewards high status provides?

In the current research, we aimed to address these questions and help explain how the existing empirical findings can be integrated with theories of status striving. First, we propose these surprising results can be partly explained by distinguishing between two different conceptions of status: (a) as a rank-order variable reflecting an individual's relative standing in terms of influence and prominence and (b) as the level of respect and esteem an individual receives. We argue that, while individuals might uniformly prefer being respected at high levels, they can vary in the status rank they prefer, with many opting for middle- and low-status rank. Second, we propose that the status rank that individuals prefer depends on their self-perceived value to a group; individuals who believe they provide little value to the group will opt for low-status rank.

More specifically, we conducted five studies that tested the following hypotheses: First, the status rank individuals strive for in a group is empirically separable from their desire for respect. Second, individuals will often prefer lower status rank in real groups in which they interact. Third, individuals' self-perceived value to their group predicts the status rank they prefer.

Two Conceptions of Social Status

Status is generally defined as the influence, prominence, and respect individuals have in a social group (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Bales, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951; Berger et al., 1980). However, status has been conceptualized in two different ways. In some work, status has been treated

as an ordinal or rank-based variable—a zero-sum commodity that only some members of a group can possess (e.g., Bales et al., 1951; Blau, 1955; Homans, 1950). In this conception, influence and leadership behaviors are emphasized as key components of status, because if one group member has more influence and control in the group, others almost inevitably have less (Bales & Slater, 1955).[1] We refer to this conception of status as *status rank*.

In other work, status has been treated as an interval variable that is non-zero-sum in groups. In this conception, status is characterized as respect and esteem in the eyes of others (Barkow, 1975; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames et al., 2006; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Status is not a limited resource, but something that all members (or none) can possess. A group might have members who respect each other highly or who have only disregard for each other. We refer to this conception of status as *respect*.

While these two conceptions of status are related, in that status rank and respect tend to be correlated, they are also conceptually separable (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). For example, individuals who do not have a great deal of influence can nonetheless be widely respected. Similarly, we propose that individuals' preference for status rank can be distinguished from their desire for respect. Individuals may shy away from high-ranking positions in a group but still desire to be respected by their peers, for example.

Self-Perceived Value to the Group

While individuals might uniformly desire high levels of respect, we propose that they can vary widely in the status rank they prefer. Functionalist accounts posit that an individual's status rank in a group is a product of the group's collective judgments and decisions about how much value that person provides to the group, relative to the other members (Emerson, 1962; Goldhamer & Shils, 1939; Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008). Groups develop an implicit consensus as to which individual skills and abilities contribute to the group's success and allocate high- and low-ranking positions according to whether individuals possess relatively more or less of those skills and abilities (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Blau, 1964).

We propose that individuals will vary in the status rank they prefer, because they vary in their self-perceived value to the group. Individuals who believe they possess high levels of the skills and abilities that contribute to the group's success will pursue higher status rank, whereas those who believe they lack such skills and are incapable of making important contributions will opt for lower status rank.[2]

There are at least two reasons why individuals who believe they provide little value to a group would opt for lower status rank. First, they might believe that others expect them to have lower status. Prior work suggests that beliefs about one's appropriate standing in the eyes of others, or "second-order expectations" (Troyer & Younts, 1997, p. 692), can powerfully shape behavior. Individuals are motivated to conform to the group's expectations so that they remain in good standing (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Ridgeway, 1981). Indeed, individuals who claim higher status than other group members believe they deserve are socially punished (Anderson et al. 2006). This suggests that individuals might be better off assimilating their preferred status rank to other group members' expectations—rather than striving for the highest status rank possible.

Individuals who perceive that they provide little value to a group might also believe that if placed in a high-ranking position, they would hamper the group's overall success. Possessing disproportionate control over the group's decisions and performance would mean taking control away from other members with superior abilities (Berger et al., 1972; Blau, 1964). Consequently, those who believe they possess lower levels of relevant skills may readily cede rank to those they perceive to have greater abilities to avoid damaging the group's performance.

In sum, we hypothesized that individuals would vary in the status rank they prefer, with some pursuing high rank and others opting for middle and lower rank. Which status rank individuals prefer would depend on their self-perceived value to the group. This is not to say that individuals who opt for lower rank necessarily desire low rank in the abstract; it is possible that those individuals wish, in an ideal world, they could provide more value to the group and possess high-status rank. Therefore, when we say that individuals "prefer" lower status rank, we refer to the rank they opt for *given the constraints upon them*.

Overview of Studies

We conducted five studies. In Study 1, we sought to first establish that some individuals indeed prefer lower status rank in an actual group and that these self-reported preferences for status rank predict actual status-seeking behavior. In Study 2, we examined the level of status individuals preferred in multiple long-term groups to which they belong. In Study 3, we used experimental methods to establish the causal priority of self-perceived value to the group and examined mediators of the effect. In Study 4, we examined additional mediators, as well as individual difference moderators. In Study 5, we tested whether we could experimentally moderate the link between self-perceived value to a group and the status rank they preferred by manipulating whether other group members knew the participant's value to the group.

These studies make several important contributions to the literature. They are the first to examine whether attitudes about one's status rank and respect are empirically separable, and the first to examine whether and why some individuals prefer lower status rank in actual groups. They are also among the first to examine the antecedents of status striving—a notable gap in the literature,

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[1] To be clear, status is related to, but distinct from, social power (e.g., Goldhamer & Shils, 1939; Kemper, 1991; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). While status involves one's relative standing in a consensually based social hierarchy, power is typically defined as control over valued resources (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Therefore, status leads others to defer in a more voluntary way than does power (Goldhamer & Shils, 1939). Individuals can have high status without high power (e.g., a well-spoken member of a jury who is elected foreperson) or high power without high status (e.g., an office gossip who holds valuable information but who is nonetheless low in social standing).

[2] Conceptually, individuals' self-perceived value to a group is related to self-efficacy beliefs or judgments of how well one can execute courses of action (Bandura, 1977, 1982). As noted previously, individuals' beliefs about whether they provide value to a group are centered on whether they think they possess skills and capacities important to a group's success. Therefore, self-efficacy beliefs concerning the specific abilities that enable the group to succeed shape overall self-perceptions of value to the group (Berger et al., 1972).

considering the important role status striving plays in directing behavior (Flynn et al., 2006; Frank, 1985; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Finally, these studies are the first to examine whether individuals' pursuit of status rank is context dependent. Existing research has often treated variables related to status seeking as dispositional (e.g., Jackson, 1999; Winter, 1988). However, we expect that the status rank individuals pursue can vary across their groups.

Study 1

Previous research has found that some individuals prefer lower status roles in hypothetical situations (Schmid Mast et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008). However, it is possible that participants are less willing to defer to others when faced with an actual group experience. Thus, before exploring any underlying mechanisms, we sought to first establish whether some individuals indeed prefer lower status rank in a group in which they would actually be participating.

We also sought to establish that self-reported preferences of status rank actually predict status-seeking behavior. A longstanding issue in the literature related to status striving is the validity of self-report measures (e.g., McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001; Winter & Stewart, 1983). It is possible, for example, that individuals might simply report a preference for lower status rank but nonetheless strive for higher status rank. We thus aimed to show that self-reported choice of status rank does in fact predict status-seeking behavior.

Method

Participants. Our sample included 100 undergraduate students (44% men, 56% women) at a West Coast university who participated as part of a broader study of behavior in groups (see Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Participants were 21 years old on average ($SD = 1.77$); 13% were African American, 42% were Asian/Asian American, 26% were White, 6% were Latin American, and 13% reported "other." They received course credit for their participation. Nine participants did not report their preferred status rank, leaving 91 participants for our analyses.

Procedure. It was important to measure the preference of status rank before we measured status-seeking behavior. A correlation based on data obtained concurrently could mean that status-seeking behavior, and the subsequent status attained, could lead to a preference for higher status, rather than vice versa (McClelland et al., 1989). Therefore, participants first completed an online survey in which they were told they would work on quantitative problems in small groups in an upcoming laboratory session. They were asked what status rank they would prefer.

Several days later, participants came to the laboratory. They were put in groups of four and videotaped while working on a set of math problems. Participants were told that the highest performing group would be paid $400. After the task, group members privately rated each other's behavior. Outside observers then watched videotape of the sessions and also rated group members' behavior.

Status rank preferred. On the online survey, participants were asked: "What rank, from 1 to 4, in terms of status and influence within the group, would you like to achieve? (1 = *highest*, 4 = *lowest*)." We then reverse-coded this item so that higher numbers meant higher status rank.

Status-seeking behavior. Group members rated each other on two items: "How much did each person try to exert control over the group's activities?" and "How much did each person attempt to act as the group's leader?" from 1 (*Does not describe this person at all*) to 7 (*Describes this person very well*). In addition, six independent judges rated each participant from videotape using the same two items (see Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). There was high consensus across observers (αs of .86 and .88 for each item, respectively). Moreover, the two items correlated with each other ($r = .93$). We combined all ratings to measure of status-seeking behavior.

Results and Discussion

As expected, participants varied in the status rank they preferred. Only 34.1% of the participants preferred the highest rank; 54.9% of the participants preferred second rank, and 11.0% of the participants preferred the third rank. Therefore, almost two thirds of the participants preferred a status rank that was lower than the top. Many individuals preferred a middle or lower status rank in an actual group in which they were going to participate.

Also as expected, the status rank individuals preferred predicted their actual status-seeking behavior, $r(89) = .22$, $p = .041$. This correlation is impressive because the level of status rank individuals preferred was assessed several days before the group session. Moreover, the predictor and criterion variables stemmed from completely different methods of data collection, avoiding common method variance.

Study 2

Study 1 focused on short-term groups in which the stakes associated with status rank were relatively low. Participants might be more willing to accept lower status rank in such settings. In Study 2, we examined longer term extant groups, such as workplace groups, where the stakes associated with status rank are higher. Would individuals still indicate a preference for lower status rank in such groups? We also examined the desire for respect in addition to the status rank participants preferred to see if these two constructs are indeed distinct. Further, we investigated the role of self-perceived value in driving these desires. Finally, as noted earlier, an important implication of our arguments is that individuals' preferred status rank can be group specific. We directly tested this idea.

Method

Participants. In this online study, participants were 101 individuals (37% male, 63% female) from around the United States. They were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online service that matches "workers" with "requesters" who post jobs to be completed. Research suggests that data obtained via MTurk are at least as reliable as those obtained via traditional methods and that MTurk participants are significantly more diverse than typical American college samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, in press). Participants received $3.25 to complete a 20-min survey. The average age was 31.96 years ($SD = $

11.01). Participants were asked to select all categories that reflected their ethnic background; 78.2% selected White, 5.9% selected African American, 5.0% selected Latino, 8.9% selected Asian American, and 2.0% selected "other."

Self-perceived value.   Participants were asked, "Please list three of the most important groups to which you belong (other than your family). These might include your workplace, congregation, P.T.A., volunteer group, sports team, study group, friends from school, book club, neighborhood friends, and so on." They were asked not to consider their family because families have somewhat unique status dynamics (Sulloway, 1997). For each group, we next asked, "How much value do you provide this group, relative to other group members?" which they rated on a scale from 1 (*At the top of the group*) to 7 (*At the bottom of the group*), and "How much do you make important contributions?" as well as "How able are you to make important contributions to this group?" These latter two items were rated on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much so*).

Individuals' value to a group is based primarily on their competencies relevant to the group task and to their social and leadership skills (Berger et al., 1980; Van Vugt, 2006). Participants were thus also asked to list three "personal characteristics, skills, and abilities that are highly valued in your group. These are typically the skills and abilities that are important for that group's success." After listing three characteristics, they were asked, "Keeping in mind the list you made above, where do you think you rank, relative to other group members, in terms of characteristics, skills or abilities that are valuable to the group?" which was rated on a scale from 1 (*At the top of the group*) to 7 (*At the bottom of the group*). After reverse-scoring the rank-based items, these four items all correlated together within each group, $\alpha = .88$, on average. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Blau, 1964), individuals' self-perceived value to each group was strongly associated with the possession of abilities that contribute to the group's success.

Status rank preferred.   For each group, participants were asked, "In terms of your overall status and influence in the group, which rank would you prefer?" on a scale from 1 (*At the top* [*most status and influence*]) to 7 (*At the bottom* [*least status and influence*]); as well as "In terms of your leadership standing in the group, which rank would you prefer?" on a scale from 1 (*At the top* [*primary leader of the group*]) to 7 (*At the bottom* [*not a leader at all*]). Participants rated questions that were based on the findings in Study 1—"How much do you try to exert control over this group's activities?" "How motivated are you to achieve the leadership position?" as well as "How much do you attempt to act as the group leader?" "To what extent do you want to lead the group's activities?" and "To what extent do you want to have a high level of status and influence in this group?"—on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much so*). All of these items correlated together within each group, average $\alpha = .92$.

Desire for respect.   Participants rated, "How much do you care if other members of this group view you with respect and hold you in esteem?" and "How important is being a highly valued member of this group to you?" on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much so*). These items correlated .78 on average.

Current status.   Because participants reported on existing groups to which they belong, we wanted to isolate their status striving from their perceptions of their actual current status (McClelland et al., 1989). Thus, we asked participants to rate their current status rank in each group, from 1 (*I am at the top of the group in status*) to 7 (*I am at the bottom of the group in status*). The means of these ratings were 3.01 (*SD* = 1.23), 3.22 (*SD* = 1.19), and 3.46 (*SD* = 1.29) in the three groups they listed, respectively, indicating they ranked around the middle on average.

Results

To examine whether the level of status rank preferred and the desire for respect were empirically distinct, we conducted exploratory factor analyses for each of the three groups the participants listed. There was no evidence for a single, general factor in any group; instead, two factors always emerged, with the first factor always defined by status rank items and the second factor always defined by respect items. In each of the three groups, the intended loadings (*M* = .89) were all higher than cross-loadings (*M* = .20) for every item in all groups. These analyses indicate level of status rank preferred and desire for respect were two separate factors.

As in Study 1, there was considerable variation in the level of status rank participants preferred. For example, 55.5% reported that they wanted to be "at the top" or "near the top" of the status and influence hierarchy in the first group they listed, but 44.5% reported a desire to be "above average," "about average," or "below average" in the group.

We next investigated whether self-perceived value to the group predicted level of status rank preferred. Given the nested nature of our data—three groups within each individual—we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) for our analyses. HLM was appropriate for these data because it accounted for the interdependence of the three sets of ratings within each individual and allowed us to analyze variance in status rank preferred within individuals (across their three groups) separate from variance between individuals (Hofmann, 1997). We used the software package HLM 6.08 to implement HLM analyses (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2008).

The first requirement for such an analysis was that individuals needed to vary in the level of status rank they preferred across the three groups they listed. To test this, we conducted an HLM-based analysis of variance (ANOVA) of status rank preferred, which estimates the extent to which variance in the outcome variable exists at Level 1 (in our case, within individuals) and Level 2 (between individuals; Hofmann, 1997; Hofmann, Griffin, & Gavin, 2000). Results from this analysis indicated that 51.1% of the variance in status rank preferred existed within individuals (48.9% was between individuals). Thus, individuals' preferred status rank varied substantially from group to group.

Next, to test whether this variation was predicted by within-individual variation in self-perceived value across groups, we conducted a random coefficient regression model (Hofmann, 1997; Hofmann et al., 2000) with preferred status rank as the outcome and self-perceived value as a Level 1 predictor variable.[3] Self-perceived value to the group within individuals (across groups) was highly predictive of the level of status rank participants'

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[3] All Level 1 predictors in the presented analyses were centered around the grand mean, as advised by Hofmann & Gavin (1998). Separate analyses were also run using group-mean centering, with no meaningful differences in results.

preferred, $\gamma_{10} = .81$, $t(301) = 17.60$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, according to the procedure outlined by Hofmann et al. (2000), estimated R^2 for this Level 1 model was equal to .53, indicating that 53% of the within-individuals variance in status rank preferred was accounted for by within-individuals variance in self-perceived value to the group, thus strongly supporting our hypothesis.

We next analyzed desire for respect, to see if it was similarly predicted by perceptions of value to the group. Individuals' desire for respect across their three groups was significantly associated with their self-perceived value across these groups, $\gamma_{10} = .65$, $t(301) = 10.28$, $p < .001$. However, estimated R^2 was substantially lower than in the status rank model—.26 as compared with .53—suggesting that desire for respect was less closely tied to self-perceived value to the group. As a more direct test, we followed the procedure outlined by P. Cohen, Brook, Cohen, Velez, and Garcia (1990) for testing whether a predictor has comparable relationships with two dependent measures. After standardizing all of our measures, we regressed preferred status rank on self-perceived value and saved all of the predicted scores. Then, we subtracted these scores from participants' desire for respect and regressed this difference measure on self-perceived value to the group. The coefficient of self-perceived value to the group was significant and negative, $\gamma_{10} = -.15$, $t(301) = -3.36$, $p = .001$, indicating that level of status rank preferred was indeed more strongly predicted by self-perceived value to the group than was desire for respect.

Lastly, we performed our main analysis again using current status as a control variable. Within-individual (across-group) variation in level of status rank preferred was significantly predicted by self-perceived value, $\gamma_{10} = .55$, $t(300) = 9.31$, $p < .001$, when self-reported current status rank was controlled for, $\gamma_{20} = -.34$, $t(300) = -6.44$, $p < .001$. Therefore, individuals' current status did not drive the association between self-perceived value to the group and the status rank they preferred.

In sum, individuals' preference of status rank was empirically distinct from their desire for status. Further, there were both inter- and intraindividual differences in level of status rank preferred: Individuals differed from each other in the status rank they preferred, and individuals' preferred status rank differed across the different groups to which they belonged. Finally, the status rank individuals preferred was contingent upon the value they believed they provided to each group; in groups where they provided less value, they preferred lower status rank.

Study 3

In Study 2, we found a strong correlation between self-perceived value to the group and the status rank individuals preferred. However, the direction of causality was still unclear. In Study 3, we thus used an experimental design to establish the causal role of self-perceived value to the group on level of status rank participants preferred.

Further, in the introduction, we proposed two possible reasons that individuals with low self-perceived value to the group might prefer lower status rank. First, they might be conforming to other group members' expectations of their status rank. Second, they might be concerned that if placed in a high-status position, they would hurt the group's performance. We tested these two mechanisms.

Method

Participants.   Study participants were 104 individuals (37% male, 63% female) recruited from around the United States via MTurk; they received $3.00 for their participation. The average age was 30.21 years ($SD = 11.17$). When asked their ethnicity, 72% selected White, 5% selected African American, 8% selected Latino, 6% selected Asian American, and 6% selected "other."

Procedure and experimental manipulation.   Participants were told they would individually complete a "contrast sensitivity" perception task (Troyer, 2001; Wagner, Ford, & Ford, 1986) and would work on another similar perception task in a virtual four-person team (via an online chat room). Their performance on the contrast sensitivity task was indicative of their value to the group: "Contrast sensitivity is critical to high performance in the group task. Past research shows that contrast sensitivity ability is related to performance on the second perception task—i.e., the task you will work on with your virtual team."

In the individual contrast sensitivity task, participants made decisions on which of two checkerboard designs on a screen contained more white area. The designs were shown for 5 s to prevent the participants from simply counting the squares (Wagner et al., 1986). Upon completing 20 trials, participants were told to wait while the other participants finished the task.

After approximately 30 s, all participants were told that they answered 12 out of 20 trials correctly and were told their teammates' scores. Participants in the *high relative ability* condition were told their three teammates achieved scores of 7, 10, and 9—making the participant the best performer in their group. Participants in the *low relative ability* condition were told their teammates achieved scores of 15, 14, and 17—making the participant the worst performer in their group. Participants then completed a short survey. Upon completion, they were told there was no group task, debriefed, and paid. A suspicion check showed no participants suspected the feedback to be false.

Status rank preferred.   Participants rated the same items as in Study 2. After reverse-scoring the ranking items and standard-scoring all items, we found that all items correlated with each other ($\alpha = .93$), so we averaged them together ($M = .00$, $SD = .83$).

Desire for respect.   Participants rated the same items as in Study 2. These items correlated with each other, $\alpha = .86$, $r(102) = .75$, and were thus averaged together (M = 4.53, $SD = 1.55$).

Beliefs about occupying a higher status rank.   We asked participants to "imagine that in the upcoming group task, you occupy the top ranking position in the group (i.e., you have the most influence and status in the group and act as the group's leader)." Then, to assess their perceptions of their teammates' expectations, we asked, "How much do you think the other group members will want you to have a high level of status and influence in the group task?" "How much do you think the other group members will want you to exert control over the group's activities?" "How much do you think the other group members will hope that you act as the group leader?" "How much do you think the other group members will view you as a highly valued member of the group?" "How much do you think the other group members will want you to achieve the leadership position in the group?" and "How much do you think the other group members will want you to lead the group's activities in the next task?" on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). After reverse-scoring items related

to the group's expectations and standard-scoring all items, they correlated with each other, $\alpha = .94$, and were averaged to form an overall measure of beliefs about others' expectations ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.43$).

Participants then rated two items, "I am worried that the groups' performance would suffer from my being in this position," and "I am concerned that the group would be worse off if I were assigned to this position in the group," on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). These two items correlated with each other, $\alpha = .93$, $r(102) = .87$, and were thus combined to form an overall measure of concern over hampering the group's success ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 2.03$).

Manipulation check. At the end of the survey, participants were asked, "Relative to the other group members, where did you rank in your score on the contrast sensitivity task?" which they rated from first to fourth.

Results and Discussion

We again conducted a factor analysis of the level of status rank preferred and desire for respect items, and again two factors emerged. The average intended loadings ($M = .80$) were substantially higher than average cross-loadings (mean cross-loading = .38). Only one item, "To what extent do you want to have a high level of status and influence in the group task?" loaded roughly equally on both factors. This is thus supportive of the distinction between the level of status rank participants preferred and their desire for respect.

In a manipulation check, participants in the low relative ability condition reported a lower rank in performance ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .36$) than did those in the high relative ability condition ($M = 1.11$, $SD = .38$), $t(102) = 38.61$, $p < .001$. The manipulation was thus successful; participants recognized their performance rank.

Consistent with our hypotheses, participants in the high relative ability condition preferred a higher status rank ($M = .18$, $SD = .86$) than those in the low relative ability condition ($M = -.19$, $SD = .76$), $t(102) = 2.29$, $p = .024$. This suggests self-perceived

relative abilities had a causal effect on the level of status rank they preferred. To illustrate this effect in a more intuitive way, Figure 1 presents responses to the item, "In terms of your overall status and influence in the group, which rank would you prefer?"

However, participants in the high relative ability condition did not report a higher desire for respect and esteem ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.70$) than those in the low relative ability condition ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(102) = 0.41$, $p = .686$. Thus, the desire for respect was not related to self-perceived abilities and value to the group.

Finally, we conducted a mediation analysis on two variables: beliefs about others' expectations, and concerns over hampering the group's success. We used Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping procedure, which involved 1,000 resamples with replacement to derive a 95% confidence bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effects of self-perceived value to the group on level of status preferred as transmitted via the two proposed mediators.

We included both mediators in a combined model. This analysis revealed indirect effects of .385 and .113 with a 95% confidence intervals of [.233, .600] and [.005, .267], respectively, for beliefs about others' expectations and concerns about hampering the group's performance. This indicates both variables had statistically significant indirect effects, given that the zero points were not included in the interval (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). However, a contrast analysis revealed that beliefs about others' expectations played a stronger mediating role than did concerns over hampering the group's success (contrast = .271, with a 95% confidence interval of [.097, .510]). Thus, individuals with lower self-perceived abilities preferred lower rank primarily out of conformity to the group's expectations.

In sum, the status rank individuals preferred was again empirically distinct from their desire for respect. Further, using an experimental manipulation, we found self-perceived value to the group had a causal effect on level of status rank preferred. Finally, conformity to the group's expectations was the primary mediator of this effect.
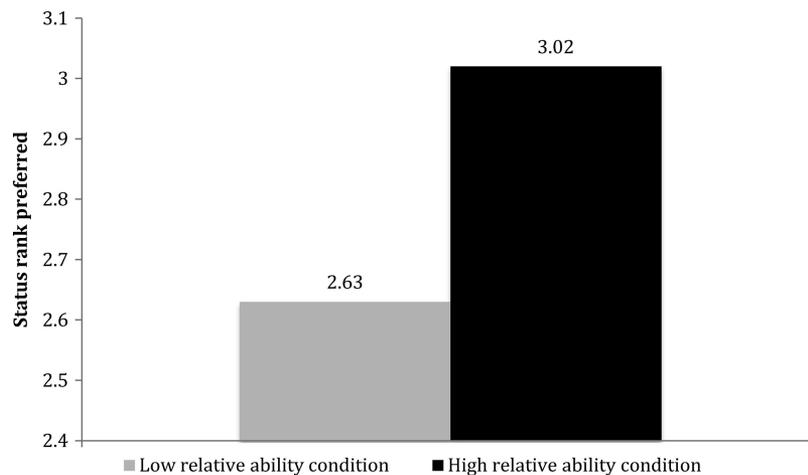

Figure 1. Study 3: The effects of relative ability on status rank preferred. The difference across conditions on this item was significant at $t(102) = 2.50$, $p = .01$. The means shown were reverse-scored so that higher values reflected higher status rank preferred.

Study 4

In Study 4, we had a number of aims. First, we examined a broader set of possible mediating mechanisms. Specifically, it is possible that perceptions of legitimacy could play a role in shaping the status rank people prefer (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Individuals who believe they provide less value to the group might prefer lower status because they feel that they would lack legitimacy in a higher-status position (Lammers et al., 2008).

Another possibility is that individuals prefer lower status rank because they do not want to take on the responsibilities associated with higher status (Keltner et al., 2008). Higher status group members have more impact on the group's performance and thus more responsibility for group outcomes. Those with lower self-perceived value might feel less equipped to handle such responsibility.

Second, we addressed the possible role of self-esteem, or beliefs regarding one's overall worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Given that individuals with higher self-esteem are more satisfied with themselves and have more positive self-perceptions in general, they might generally prefer higher status rank. However, self-esteem and self-perceived value to a group are also likely distinct from each other. An individual who believes he possesses specific skills that would contribute to his group's success might still have low self-worth. We thus hypothesized that the effect of self-perceived value to the group would hold up after controlling for self-esteem.

Third, related to concerns over legitimacy, fairness concerns might moderate the effects of self-perceived value to a group. Some individuals are motivated to perceive status hierarchies as fair and based on differences in merit and to believe that those at the top of hierarchies achieved their position due to superior competence (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980). These individuals might thus be especially likely to defer to others when they believe they provide less value to a group. To test this moderator, we measured two individual difference variables: system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and just-world beliefs (Lerner, 1980), both of which are related to the motivation to see the status quo as legitimate and fair.

Method

Participants. Study 4 participants were 59 individuals (49% male, 51% female) from around the United States who again were recruited via MTurk and received $3.00. The average participant age was 31.68 years ($SD = 11.58$). When asked their ethnicity, 83% selected White, 5% selected African American, 7% selected Latino, 3% selected Asian American, and 2% selected "other."

Procedure and experimental manipulation. The procedure was very similar to that of Study 3: participants completed an individual task alone, were told that they would complete a similar task with a virtual team, and then completed a survey. However, there were two main differences: First, at the beginning of the session, participants completed measures of system justification, belief in a just world, and self-esteem. Second, to help increase generalizability, we used a different task that involved judging individuals' personality from photographs (e.g., Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). Participants were presented images of 20 individuals and asked to judge each individual target's level

of conscientiousness (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). After the task, participants' ability relative to their teammates was again manipulated with false performance feedback.

System justification. We used Kay and Jost's (2003) measure of system justification but tailored the items to reflect beliefs about status hierarchies in groups. For example, they were asked, "In general, the status hierarchies that emerge in small groups are fair." All items were rated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree"*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), α = .87, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.07$.

Belief in a just world. We used the six-item Belief in Just-World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987), α = .87, $M = 3.53$, $SD = .95$. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

Self-esteem. Participants completed Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), α = .94, $M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.00$.

Status rank preferred. We used the same questions as in Study 3. After reverse-scoring the ranking items and standard-scoring all items, they correlated with each other, α = .93 ($M = .00$, $SD = .83$).

Desire for respect. We used the same questions as in Study 3. These items again correlated with each other, α = .91, $r(57) = .83$, ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.56$).

Beliefs about occupying a higher status position. We asked the same questions from Study 3 regarding beliefs about the group's expectations, α = .92 ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.29$) and hampering the group's performance, α = .93 ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.94$). Participants were also ask to respond to the statements "I would feel like I would lack legitimacy in this position" and "I am worried that others will question my legitimacy if I occupy this position," responses to which were combined, α = .87, ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.86$). Responses to the statements "I do not want the responsibility of being in this position" and "I would be worried about the responsibilities of this position" were combined, α = .86, ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.89$).

Manipulation check. Finally, as in Study 3, participants were asked, "Relative to the other group members, where did you rank in your score on the contrast sensitivity task?" which they rated from first to fourth.

Results and Discussion

In a factor analysis, two factors again emerged, with the first factor defined by only preferred status rank items and the second factor defined only by the desire for respect items. The intended loadings ($M = .86$) were higher than all cross-loadings (mean cross-loading = .18) for every item. These analyses provided further evidence that level of status rank participants preferred and desire for respect were separate factors.

In a manipulation check, participants in the low relative ability condition reported ranking higher in performance ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .66$) than did those in the high relative ability condition ($M = 1.23$, $SD = .57$), $t(57) = 15.33$, $p < .001$. The manipulation was successful, in that participants knew their rank in performance.

We also again found, even in this different task setting, that participants in the high relative ability condition preferred higher status rank ($M = .23$, $SD = .82$) more than did participants in the

low relative ability condition ($M = -.24$, $SD = .79$), $t(57) = 2.28$, $p = .026$. This suggests self-perceived relative abilities had a causal effect on the level of status rank participants preferred. However, again, participants in the high relative ability condition did not report a higher desire for respect and esteem ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.51$) than those in the low relative ability condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(57) = 0.60$, $p = .551$. Thus, the desire for respect was again unrelated to self-perceived abilities.

Using the same bootstrapping procedure as in Study 3, we conducted a mediation analysis with all four possible mediators included in the model. This analysis revealed a significant indirect effect only for beliefs about others' expectations (.256 with a 95% confidence interval of [.026, .700]). The remaining three mediators—concerns over hampering the group's success, concerns over legitimacy, and avoidance of responsibility—did not have significant indirect effects, as the zero points were included in the intervals, .192, [−.024, .585]; −.094 [−.510, .107]; and .011 [−.068, .154], respectively.

Next, we examined whether our manipulation of self-perceived relative ability influenced the status rank individuals preferred, even after controlling for self-esteem. In a simultaneous regression, self-esteem ($B = 0.191$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = .23$, $p = .07$) did not significantly predict preferred status rank, and effect of the manipulation remained ($B = 0.481$, $SE = 0.20$, $\beta = .29$, $p = .022$). Therefore, the effect of self-perceived ability held up, above and beyond the effects of self-esteem.

Finally, we examined system justification and just-world beliefs as possible moderators. In moderated multiple regression (J. Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003), neither variable moderated the effect of the manipulation. The interaction variable was not significant for system justification beliefs ($B = 0.029$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = .03$, $p = .770$), or for just-world beliefs ($B = -0.045$, $SE = .011$, $\beta = -.05$, $p = .68$). This suggests the effect of self-perceived value on status rank preferred did not depend upon the extent to which people were motivated to perceive hierarchies as fair.

In sum, the level of status rank individuals preferred was again distinct from their desire for respect. In another experimental manipulation, we again found evidence that self-perceived value to a group had a causal effect on level of status rank preferred. We also found again that conformity to the group's expectations mediated the effect. We did not find supportive evidence for other mechanisms, including concerns over hampering the group's success, concerns over legitimacy, or a desire to avoid responsibility. Finally, our findings held up even after controlling for self-esteem.

Study 5

The results of Studies 3 and 4 suggest that when individuals believe other group members expect them to have lower status, they prefer lower status. In Study 5 we aimed to take this idea a step further. Would the effect of self-perceived value to the group on level of status rank individuals prefer be mitigated if other group members held no expectations about them? In situations where individuals believe that other group members are unaware of their relative abilities, individuals' self-perceived value might have less impact on the status rank they prefer. For example, an individual who believes her fellow group members do not know of

her relative skills might seek higher status rank, even if she believes she provides little value to the group.

We tested this idea in Study 5 using a similar design as in Studies 3 and 4. However, in addition to manipulating participants' self-perceived value to the group, we manipulated whether participants believed that other group members knew of their previous task performance. In Studies 3 and 4, individuals likely believed their fellow group members knew their task performance; in Study 5, we thus explicitly stated to some participants that their fellow group members would not be aware of the participants' task performance.

Method

Participants.   Participants were 41 individuals (61% male, 39% female) from around the United States who again were recruited via MTurk and received $3.00. The average participant age was 41.92 years ($SD = 17.32$); when asked to report their ethnicity, 76% selected White, 7% selected African American, 10% selected Latino, 5% selected Asian American, and 2% selected "other."

Procedure and experimental manipulations.   We used a similar procedure to that in Studies 3 and 4. However, to further establish generalizability, in Study 5 we used yet another task involving "meaning insight" (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). We also manipulated participants' anonymity in their virtual team in addition to manipulating their performance feedback. We thus used a 2 × 2 design, with relative ability and anonymity as two between-subjects factors.

In the meaning insight task, participants were presented with 20 multiple-choice problems. Each problem presented a well-known English word (e.g., *depart*) and then three words ostensibly taken from a primitive language studied by linguists (e.g., *sum-yeh*, *lak-tun*, and *yur-nan*). They were asked to choose which primitive word had the same meaning as the English word.

After working through 20 meaning insight problems, participants in *the high relative ability* condition each were told that they scored 14 correct out of 20 and that their teammates achieved scores of 12, 10, 7, and 5—making the participant the best performer in their group. Participants in the *low relative ability* condition each were told that they scored 7 correct out of 20 and that each their teammates scored 14, 12, 10, and 5—making the participant the second-worst performer in their group.

We manipulated anonymity by telling participants in the *anonymous* condition that although each team member would receive a list of all meaning insight scores on the team, no one would know which team member achieved which score. Therefore, the other team members would not know how the participant scored. Participants in the *identified* condition were explicitly told that all team members would know which team member achieved which score. Therefore, the other team members would know how the participant scored.

Manipulation check.   Participants were asked, "Relative to the other group members, where did you rank in your score on the contrast sensitivity task?" which they rated from first to fifth.

Status rank preferred.   As in Studies 3 and 4, participants were asked, "In terms of your overall status and influence in the group, which rank would you prefer?" which they rated on a scale from 1st (*Most status and influence*) to 5th (*Least status and*

influence) and "In terms of your leadership standing in the group, which rank would you prefer?" which they rated on a scale from 1st (*Primary leader of the group*) to 5th (*Not a leader at all*). These ranking items correlated with each other ($\alpha = .94$, $r = .89$), so were averaged to form one overall measure. We then reverse-scored them so that higher numbers reflected choosing higher status rank in the group ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.13$).

Desire for respect. We used the same questions as in Studies 3 and 4. These items correlated ($\alpha = .85$, $r = .73$) and were thus averaged ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.49$).

Results and Discussion

In a factor analysis, two factors again emerged, with the first factor defined by preferred status rank items, and the second factor defined by the desire for respect items. The intended loadings ($M = .96$) were higher than all cross-loadings (mean cross-loading = $-.06$). Once again, for every item, the intended loading was far higher than the cross-loading.

In a check of the performance feedback manipulation, participants in the low relative ability condition reported a higher rank in performance ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.81$), than those in the high relative ability ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(39) = 9.11$, $p < .001$.

We submitted level of status rank preferred to a 2 (relative ability: high vs low) × 2 (anonymous vs identified) between-participants ANOVA. Participants in the high relative ability condition preferred higher status rank ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.78$) than participants in the low relative ability condition ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 37) = 12.35$, $p = .001$. There was also a main effect for anonymity, in that participants in the anonymous condition preferred higher status rank ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .84$) than participants in the identified condition ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 37) = 9.49$, $p = .004$. This suggests that more anonymity led to preferring higher status rank.

There was also an interaction, $F(1, 37) = 6.49$, $p = .015$. For participants in the anonymity condition, the performance feedback did not affect the status rank they preferred, $t(19) = 0.73$, $p = .472$, but for participants in the identified condition, the performance feedback did affect the status rank they preferred, $t(18) = 4.01$, $p = .001$. The means are presented in Figure 2. As shown, when participants were anonymous and others could not form expectations of their rank, those with lower self-perceived relative abilities did not prefer lower status rank. These findings provide evidence that individuals with lower self-perceived abilities do not "prefer" lower status rank in the sense of desiring it under ideal conditions. Rather, individuals with low self-perceived value to the group opt for lower status rank in order to conform to others' expectations.

We next submitted the desire for respect to the same 2 (relative ability: high vs. low) × 2 (anonymous vs identified) between-participants ANOVA. Similar to Studies 3 and 4, participants in the *high relative ability* condition did not report a higher desire for respect and esteem (M = 4.86 SD = 1.14) than those in the *low relative ability* condition (M = 4.38, SD = 1.92), $F(1, 37) = 0.99$, $p = .327$. There was also no significant effect for anonymity, $F(1, 37) = 0.75$, $p = .393$, or interaction, $F(1, 37) = 0.18$, $p = .672$.

In sum, we again found that the level of status rank preferred and the desire for status were empirically separable. We again found that the level of status rank participants preferred was a product of their self-perceived value to the group. However, this effect only held up for individuals who believed their group knew of their past performance. For individuals who believed their group was unaware of their past performance, they preferred higher status rank regardless of their self-perceived value to the group.
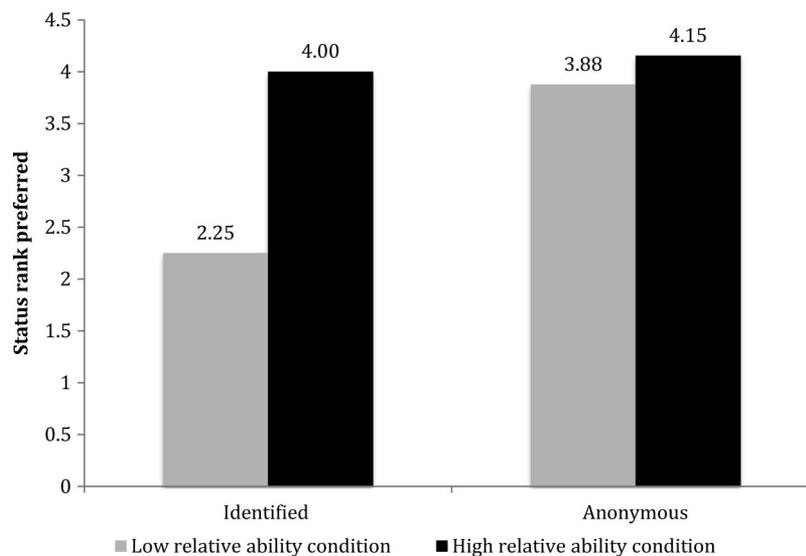
Figure 2. Study 5: The effects of relative ability and anonymity on status rank preferred. "Identified" refers to the condition in which, ostensibly, fellow group members knew the participant's task performance. "Anonymous" refers to the condition in which, ostensibly, fellow group members did not know it. The interaction was significant, $F(1, 37) = 6.49$, $p = .015$. The means shown were reverse-scored so that higher values reflected higher status rank preferred.

This provides further evidence that perceptions of others' expectations drive the status rank individuals prefer.

General Discussion

Summary of Findings

Across multiple studies, we found consistent evidence that the status rank individuals preferred was empirically distinguishable from their desire for respect. Individuals might opt for lower status rank, for example, but still desire high levels of respect. We also consistently found that individuals varied in the status rank they preferred, with a substantial proportion of individuals opting for middle or lower rank.

Why would anyone prefer lower status rank? Individuals preferred lower status when they believed they lacked characteristics important to the group's success, inferring that the group expected them to occupy a lower status rank. Self-perceived value to the group predicted the level of status rank participants' preferred in real-life groups such as friendship groups (Study 2) as well as in ad hoc laboratory teams (Studies 3, 4, and 5) and in studies using naturalistic (Studies 2) as well as experimental methods (Studies 3, 4, and 5). The relation between self-perceived social value and level of status rank preferred was thus quite robust.

Moreover, we found that pursuit of status rank was context specific. The status rank an individual preferred tended to vary across the groups to which he or she belonged; the same individual might seek higher status rank in some groups but opt for lower status rank in others. This cross-group variation in status rank preferred depended on the value individuals believed they provided to each group.

We also examined a number of possible mechanisms that might drive the effect of self-perceived value to a group on status rank preferred. As mentioned previously, these analyses consistently suggested that others' expectations were the core driver: individuals who believed they provided little value to the group believed that others expected them to possess lower status rank. This finding is consistent with prior research, which has shown that individuals tend to avoid claiming too much status in groups, relative to others' expectations (Anderson et al., 2006).

These results also support the notion that individuals might desire high status rank in the abstract, but the realities of interacting in actual groups constrain their ambitions. Again, in Study 2, we found that individuals could prefer high status rank in one group and not another, suggesting that preferences for status rank represent less of an intrinsic drive for status and more of a context-specific motivation that leads individuals to be willing to accept low status when external constraints (i.e., the expectations of others) make it necessary. Study 5 provided further evidence for this idea. When such external constraints were removed, participants indicated preferences for high-status rank even when they had reason to believe that their value to the group was low. In contrast, we did not find consistent evidence that individuals preferred lower status because they believed that if placed in a high-status rank, they would harm the group's success. Moreover, we did not find evidence that feelings of legitimacy, concerns about responsibility, or desires to perceive hierarchies as fair explained the relationship between self-perceived value and preferred status rank.

Implications

In the current research, we identified two distinct conceptualizations of status: status rank and respect. The status rank individuals preferred was empirically distinct from their desire for respect. This finding suggests that status rank and respect might have different psychological correlates and perhaps different effects on human behavior. For example, individuals might affectively react more intensely to losses in respect than to losses in status rank.

Moreover, the distinction between status rank and respect might help shed light on a contradiction highlighted above. Although many theorists have argued that the desire for status is universal (e.g., A. Adler, 1930; Maslow, 1943), some findings suggested a substantial portion of individuals in a given setting prefer lower status. Our findings might help reconcile these seemingly opposed ideas by suggesting that these camps might be focused on two different constructs. While the desire for respect might be more universal, in that individuals more uniformly prefer being respected and held in higher regard to being disrespected and held in contempt, individual vary in the status rank they seek in a given group context.

The present work is also some of the only research on the antecedents of the desire for status. Status-related motivations have a profound effect on individuals' social behavior, personal goals, relationships with others, and major life decisions (e.g., Flynn et al., 2006; Fodor & Farrow, 1979; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Yet very little attention has been given to the origins of such motivations. It seems that some individuals believe they possess superior abilities that enable them to make critical contributions to their groups, whereas others do not. Individuals differ in the rank they believe others expect them to occupy, which drives their preferences.

Further, prior work has depicted status motivations as being primarily driven by dispositional differences (e.g., Jackson, 1999; Winter, 1988; Winter & Stewart, 1983). Our findings suggest that the level of status rank preferred can vary even within the same individual, depending upon the extent to which the individual believes he or she provides value to specific groups. Thus, status motivations seem driven by both dispositional and contextual variables.

Finally, another important implication concerns how group status hierarchies are stabilized and organized. Were all individuals to seek high-status rank, they would be driven to compete with one another for higher standing, and the group would struggle to coordinate action and effectively pursue collective ends. In short, for status hierarchies to function, they must be consensual, and some group members must defer. These studies help to clarify who does so, when, and why.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research focused on the effects of *self-perceived* value to the group on the level of status rank preferred. It would thus be interesting in future research to examine the effects of *actual* value to the group as well. Prior research has shown that the link between self-perceived and actual competence is often quite low (for a review, see Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). Given that value to the group is closely tied to one's competence (Blau, 1964), this suggests that self-perceived and actual value to the group might not be highly correlated either. One hypothesis is that

self-perceived value to the group has a stronger effect on the level of status rank preferred than does actual value; individuals might gauge the rank they seek simply on the basis of where they believe they rank in value.

Furthermore, an important direction for future research would be to further examine the distinct psychological implications of status rank and respect. Though each is a form of social status and they are correlated with each other, the current research suggests that individuals more readily accept lower status rank, but they might not as readily accept being disrespected. Respect might thus have stronger implications for well-being and health than rank, with individuals suffering sharper psychological costs from low levels of respect than from lower status rank.

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