



IRLE WORKING PAPER
#115-16
October 2016

Striving for superiority: The human desire for status

Cameron Anderson and John Angus D. Hildreth

Cite as: Cameron Anderson and John Angus D. Hildreth. (2016). "Striving for superiority: The human desire for status". IRLE Working Paper No. 115-16. <http://irle.berkeley.edu/workingpapers/115-16.pdf>

Striving for superiority: The human desire for status

Cameron Anderson

University of California, Berkeley

John Angus D. Hildreth

Cornell University

Author Note

Corresponding author: John Angus D. Hildreth, Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell College of Business, Sage Hall, 106 East Ave, Ithaca, NY 14853, United States. Cell: (510) 502 0910.

Email: hildreth@cornell.edu

Abstract

Status inequality and social stratification cause much social ill. So why do status hierarchies pervade societies and social groups? One possible explanation lies in the individual desire for status. A recent review found the desire for status is a fundamental human motive – people seek to receive respect and deference from others. We found converging evidence that this desire is competitive in nature; people not only desire to be respected, they desire to be accorded more respect and deference than others. In a laboratory experiment, participants (n = 226) felt better when they alone had high status than when everyone had equal status. In a national survey, participants (n = 715) preferred having higher status than others, even if it meant that everyone had lower status on an absolute level. Status hierarchies might be ubiquitous in part because people are unsatisfied with egalitarianism and pursue positions of superior (and unequal) status.

Keywords. Status, inequality, social structure, motivation, well being

Introduction

Status inequality is associated with myriad social problems. At the societal level it predicts unhappiness (Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995), selfishness (Côté, House, Willer, 2015), illness and mortality (Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner & Prothrow-Stith, 1997), and violence and corruption (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Jong-Sung & Khagram, 2005). At the group level it causes mistrust among members, dampens motivation, and on balance, hampers collective performance (for a review, see Anderson & Brown, 2010). A profoundly important and yet unanswered question is thus, if status inequality causes so much dysfunction, why does it pervade human social groups? Indeed, status hierarchies appear to be ubiquitous (Leavitt, 2005), emerging in friendship groups, in the workplace, in neighborhoods, and even in contexts where people are incentivized to be egalitarian (Gruenfeld & Tiedens, 2010).

Theoretically, status differences are not an inevitable feature of human social life. Status is defined as the respect, admiration, and voluntary deference a person is accorded by others (Anderson, John, Keltner & Kring, 2001; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). One can imagine a group in which everyone is accorded equal standing, such as a scientific team whose members respect each other's skills and all members have equal say in important decisions, perhaps deferring to different members at different times – deferring to the best theoretician when generating hypotheses, the best statistician when analyzing data, and the best writer when summarizing results. Members on this hypothetical team would enjoy the same level of status on the whole. Nonetheless, while egalitarianism like this is theoretically possible, it appears extraordinarily rare in societies and groups.

Why is status inequality so pervasive? One potential explanation lies in the individual desire for status. A recent review of diverse social scientific literatures concluded that the desire

for status is a fundamental human motive; in short, individuals care deeply about the respect they are accorded by others, and they go to great lengths to manage their status (Anderson, Hildreth & Howland, 2015). It is possible – and we explore such a possibility in this research – that the human status motive involves specifically the goal of possessing *higher status than others*, rather than simply to possessing high status. That is, people might not only want to be respected, they might want to be accorded *more* respect than others. If so, then individuals' pursuit of status might help create social stratification.

To break this idea down further, the desire for status could conceivably involve two different goals. In the language of social value orientation (e.g., Van Lange, 1999), on the one hand, people might have an *individualist* orientation toward status. This would involve wanting a high level of respect from others, but having little concern about whether they are accorded more or less respect than others. On the other hand, people might have a *competitive* orientation toward status. If this were the case, people would care about not only being respected, they would care particularly about being accorded more respect than others.

If the human desire for status is competitive in nature, then this might help explain the pervasiveness of status inequality. A competitive orientation would make egalitarian social structures psychologically unsatisfying, leading individuals to seek to change them – specifically to attain a position of higher (and thus unequal) status than others. Egalitarian structures, even if a group were to form them temporarily, would be unstable over time as individuals would continually jockey for higher status than others and strive for superior social positions. This competition and jockeying over status would lead to status differences and thus generate status hierarchies.

The primary aim of the current research is to examine whether and to what degree the human desire for status is competitive in nature. Prior work has suggested that people have an entirely individualist stance toward status (Anderson, Willer, Kilduff & Brown, 2012; Tyler & Blader, 2002). However, those studies examined the status positions people felt obliged to occupy rather than status they actually wanted (Anderson et al., 2012), or assessed status with extraneous variables such as performance in school (Tyler & Blader, 2002). We therefore conducted two studies that used complementary methods (Alpizar, Carlsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2005) and that avoided some of those features of the previous work.

In Study 1 we examined people's well-being under different status structures that were experimentally manipulated in laboratory groups. In Study 2 we assessed people's preferences, asking them to choose between groups with different status structures. In both studies we also examined the uniformity of status orientations across different kinds of individuals. If status hierarchies pervade social groups because people tend to take a competitive orientation toward status, then one would expect people of diverse attributes to have a competitive orientation toward status, rather than only a few individuals (e.g., narcissists).

Methods

Study 1: Laboratory Experiment

Participants. Participants were 230 undergraduate students (41% male, 59% female; average age = 21.10 years, $SD = 2.79$). They were paid \$15.00 or course credit. Participants were asked to select all racial-ethnic categories to which they belonged; 66% selected Asian American, 20% selected White, 8% selected Latino, 2% selected African American, 1% selected Native American, and 11% selected "other." Four participants failed attention check questions or had technical issues and were thus excluded from the analyses, leaving 226 participants. The

sample size was determined by the size of the pool of availability of subjects. The study was completed when the available pool of subjects ran out.

Procedure and status manipulation.

The status manipulation was based on prior research (Willer, 2009). Five participants were recruited for each laboratory session. In Phase 1 of the study, participants completed a questionnaire at individual workstations, which included measures of demographic variables, personality traits, and emotion recognition. These measures provided an ostensive basis for later status ratings in Phase 2, and allowed us to examine individual differences in the effects of the status structures.

Phase 2 included the status manipulation. Participants were first told that other members of their group also completed the same questionnaire and were provided (false) summaries of the other members' personality and emotion-recognition scores. The scores shown for each member's personality traits and emotion recognition skill ranged from high to low; all participants were shown the same set of scores for their fellow teammates (see Table S1 in the SOM for details). Participants were then told to rate the status of each member of the group based on the scores they were provided. The overall status ratings of each group member would ostensibly be used to determine which person will be selected as the leader on a group exercise completed later in the study.

After a brief wait participants were given false feedback regarding the status they were accorded by the group, as well as the status the other group members were afforded on average. Specifically, they were told that the range of possible status ratings was 1 to 7 and that their status (i.e. the median status ratings given to them by other members of your group) was either a 4 (in the own status = low conditions) or a 6 (in the own status = high conditions). They were

also then told that other group members' average status (i.e. the median status ratings that all of the other members of your group received) was either a 4 (in the others' status = low conditions) or 6 (in the other' status = high conditions). Therefore, the study used a 2 (own status = high or low) X 2 (others' status = high or low) design.

Finally, in Phase 3 of the study, participants completed four measures of psychological well-being: positive and negative affect, satisfaction with life, self-esteem. They also completed a manipulation check and a suspicion check. At the end of the study they were debriefed and paid. Three participants expressed suspicion about the status feedback; no findings changed from significant to non-significant when we included or excluded those participants. We thus included them.

Well-being. We administered the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988), (for Positive Affect, $\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.05$; for Negative Affect, $\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.03$), the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; SWLS), in which respondents provide a global, cognitive assessment of their life as a whole ($\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.79$), and state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.88$). These four measures correlated with each other after reverse-scoring Negative Affect and standardizing all four ($\alpha = 0.59$) so we combined them together.

Individual difference variables. Participants completed measures of demographic and personality variables that, based on prior literature, had been linked to status motives. These included the Big Five (the Ten Item Personality Inventory; Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003), and a self-reported desire for status measure (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, Ames, 2006; $\alpha = 0.79$; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.55$). They also completed the 16-item Narcissism Personality Inventory (Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006; $\alpha = 0.73$; $M = 5.19$, $SD = 3.21$), which involves concerns over

status; and gender as men have been hypothesized to desire status more than women (Buss, 1999).

Manipulation check. Participants were asked, “In your group, how much status do you have?” and “What about others in your group? On average, how much status do others have in your group” on a scale from 1 (“Very little”) to 7 (“A lot”). The manipulations were effective. The *own status* manipulation influenced participants’ ratings of their own status ($M_{high} = 5.27$, $SD_{high} = 1.06$; $M_{low} = 4.50$, $SD_{low} = 0.93$; $F(1, 225) = 32.73$, $p < 0.001$) but not their ratings of others’ status ($F(1, 225) = 1.24$, $p > 0.250$). The *others’ status* manipulation influenced participants’ ratings of others’ status ($M_{high} = 5.21$, $SD_{high} = 0.93$; $M_{low} = 4.21$, $SD_{low} = 0.57$; $F(1, 225) = 96.37$, $p < 0.001$) but not ratings of their own status ($F(1, 225) = 0.00$, $p > 0.250$). There were no interactions.

Results

Figure 1 shows the pattern of results, which suggests that people had a wholly competitive orientation toward status. First, there was a main effect for others’ status, $F(1, 225) = 13.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .057$, in addition to a main effect for own status, $F(1, 225) = 15.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .067$. Specifically, participants enjoyed higher well-being when others’ status was *lower* than when it was higher. In contrast, if people only had an individualist orientation toward status and not a competitive one, we would have only observed a main effect for own status; others’ status would have had no effect on participants’ well-being.

Particularly noteworthy was one of the simple effects: When participants’ own status was high, they enjoyed higher well-being when others’ status was lower than when it was higher and equal to their own, $t(111) = 1.97$, $p = .051$. Thus, participants felt better in a socially stratified

group when they alone had high status than in an egalitarian group when everyone had high status.

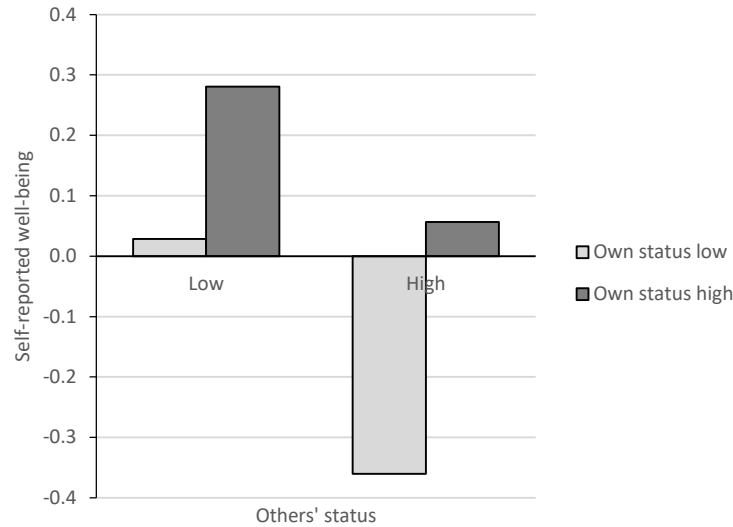


Figure 1. Self-reported well-being broken down by condition in Study 2.

While there was a main effect of own status on well-being, which might seem to suggest that participants also had an individualist orientation, that effect might be due to an individualist or competitive orientation, or both. When one's own status was higher, this would satisfy individualist concerns because it would involve having higher status on an absolute level, but also satisfy competitive concerns, because it would lead to having higher status relative to others.

A critical comparison is therefore between the conditions in which one's own and others' status were equally high (6 and 6) or equally low (4 and 4). If people had at least somewhat of an individualist orientation, one would expect well-being to be higher when everyone's status was high than when everyone's status was low, because their own status was higher in the former condition than in the latter. However, a pairwise contrast showed that the means in these two conditions did not differ almost at all, $t(111) = -.24, p = .808$. This indicates that if participants did not have higher status than others, they were no happier when their own status was high than

when it was low. This finding refutes the notion that people had any individualist orientation at all.

The competitive orientation we observed did not systematically depend on the demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) or personality traits (e.g., narcissism, extraversion, disagreeableness) we measured. That is, it was not the case that narcissists or men, for example, had a more competitive orientation toward status than non-narcissists or than women. See the Supplemental Online Materials for details. These findings are important because they suggest that a competitive orientation toward status is uniform across diverse kinds of individuals; it is not limited to a select few.

Summary. In sum, the results from Study 1 suggested that participants had a highly competitive orientation toward status. Participants enjoyed higher well-being when others' status was lower than when it was higher, and this was even true when their own status was high. In other words, participants felt better in a hierarchical group in which they alone would be afforded a high level of respect and deference, than in an egalitarian group in which all members would be afforded a high (and equal) level of respect and deference. Furthermore, refuting the notion that participants had an individualist orientation, they did not enjoy higher well-being when all group members had high status than when all group members had low status. It seems that their status relative to others mattered to their well-being, not their own absolute level of status.

Study 2: National Survey

In a second study, we assessed people's preferences, asking them to choose in which of two groups they preferred to belong. These two groups differed in their status structures, in that one group would satisfy an individualist orientation toward status, whereas the other group would satisfy a competitive orientation toward status.

Participants. Participants were 715 individuals (53% male, 47% female; average age = 35.14 years, $SD = 11.89$) recruited online from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were paid \$1.00. Participants were asked to select all racial-ethnic categories to which they belonged; 78% selected White, 9% selected African American, 8% selected Latino, 8% selected Asian American, 2% selected Native American, and 3% selected "other." The sample size was determined in advance with reference to the number of participants used in prior research (Alpizar et al., 2005; Carlsson et al., 2007). The study was completed when at least 700 subjects' data had been collected.

Attention checks. Participants first completed the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003; TIPI), which was included primarily for the purpose of checking attention early in the study. The item "Select disagree a little" was embedded in the questions and participants who failed this check were automatically expelled from the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were given another similar attention check question. Out of 728 participants who passed the first check, 13 (1.8%) failed this second attention check and were thus excluded from all analyses.

Status preference. Next, participants reported their status preference with a measure based on prior research (Alpizar et al., 2005; Tversky & Griffin, 1991; Solnick & Hemenway, 1988). Research on social value orientation, which aims to distinguish between individualist and competitive orientations, asks people to report their preferences between different scenarios (Van Lange, 1999). However, the measures most commonly used for that literature are used to assess individual differences and are less appropriate to assess normative tendencies across individuals. Economic research on so-called *positionality*, which also distinguishes individualist from competitive orientations, uses measures that are more appropriate in studying tendencies across

individuals (Alpizar et al., 2005; Carlsson et al., 2007). Therefore, we based our methods more closely on economic studies of positionality.

To provide context for their decisions, participants were first told: “The next few questions concern your status. Note, a person’s status is the level of respect, admiration, and voluntary deference he or she is given by others in a group. People with high status in a group are highly respected and admired by others, and their wishes, desires, and suggestions tend to be followed. People with low status in a group are not well respected or admired, and their wishes, desires, and suggestions tend to be ignored. Now, imagine we are able to quantify everyone's status on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being the absolute lowest status and 7 being the absolute highest.”

Participants were then asked to choose between two Scenarios, A and B. In Scenario A they would be better off in terms of status on an absolute level (what we will call *absolute status*), and in Scenario B they would be better off in terms of status relative to others (what we will call *relative status*). For example, some participants were asked, “Which of the following scenarios would you prefer? In Scenario A, Your status would be 5.00 and everyone else’s status, on average, would be 6.00. In Scenario B, Your status would be 4.50 and everyone else’s status, on average, would be 4.00. Please think carefully before selecting a choice.” If participants chose Scenario B, it would indicate they are willing to give up some absolute status in order to gain in relative status.

To obtain a reliable estimate of the degree to which people care about relative status, one should examine participants’ preferences across a range of choices (Alpizar et al., 2005; Carlsson et al., 2007). Otherwise, if participants preferred Scenario B in a single choice, we can infer they are concerned at least somewhat about relative status, but we cannot specify *the degree to which* they care about it. As an illustration, imagine participants selected Scenario B in the above

example; for that same gain in relative status (1.5 points), they might have been willing to give up much more in absolute status (e.g., 2, 3, or even 4 points). Therefore, based on prior work (Alpizar et al., 2005), we presented participants with seven different choices, which are shown in Table 1.

However, because prior work has shown that presenting participants with repeated choices introduces problems such as anchoring effects (Alpizar et al., 2005, Tyler & Blader, 2002; Solnick & Hemenway, 1988), we also followed Carlsson et al. (2007) and presented each participant with only one randomly selected choice. (Note that the different choices are not experimental conditions and we were not interested in comparing preferences across choices.)

Table 1 also shows for each choice the implicit *degree of positionality*, which is an index of the extent to which people care about relative status (Alpizar et al., 2005). This index ranges from 0.00, indicating a complete lack of concern about relative status and only a concern for absolute status, to 1.00, indicating a complete concern only for relative status and no concern about absolute status. A degree of positionality of 0.50 indicates that absolute and relative status are equally important to the person. The degree of positionality, or γ^* , is calculated as follows:

$$\gamma = \frac{\ln [x_B/x_A]}{\ln [\bar{x}_B/\bar{x}_A]}$$

where x and \bar{x} refer to one's own and everyone else's status on average, respectively, and subscripts $_A$ and $_B$ refer to Scenarios A and B, respectively. Each of the seven choices presented to participants was designed to reflect a different implicit degree of positionality, if the participant was indifferent between the two scenarios. The choices given to participants were based on simple linear transformations of the choices regarding income used in Carlsson et al.

* We used this *ratio comparison* because prior work had shown it to predict behavior better than the *additive comparison* (Johansson-Stenman, Carlsson & Daruvala, 2002), which simply reflects the difference between one's own and others' outcomes

(Carlsson et al., 2007). Following prior research (Tversky & Griffin, 1991), we also asked participants in which scenario they would be happier, in addition to which scenario they preferred.

To estimate the mean degree of positionality across participants we used the Spearman-Kärber estimator (Carlsson et al., 2007):

$$E[\gamma] = \sum_{j=1}^7 \frac{(P_j - P_{j+1})(g_j + g_{j+1})}{2}$$

where P_j is the proportion of participants who preferred Group B when the implicit degree of positionality is equal to g_j .

Individual difference variables. As in study 1, participants completed measures of demographic and personality variables. These included the self-reported desire for status (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah & Ames, 2006); socioeconomic status, which has been linked to status motives (Belmi & Lauren, 2016; SES); Narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1998), and gender.

Income was assessed with a standard measure (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo & Ickovics, 2000), participants rated their “total household income”: 1 = \$15,000 or less, 2 = \$15,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$35,000, 4 = \$35,001–\$50,000, 5 = \$50,001–\$75,000, 6 = \$75,001–\$100,000, 7 = \$100,001–\$150,000, and 8 = over \$150,000. The average rating was 4.35 ($SD = 1.85$), indicating the average household income was between \$35,001 and \$50,000. Participants also reported their education level: 1 = did not finish high school, 2 = graduated high school or had a GED, 3 = had some college education, 4 = graduated college, or 5 = had a post-graduate degree. The average rating was 3.66 ($SD = 1.05$), indicating that on average participants had some college education. The desire for status was assessed with a standard measure (Johansson-Stenman, et al., 2002; $\alpha =$

0.88; $M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.82$). Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissism Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1998; NPI; $\alpha = 0.90$; $M = 13.09$, $SD = 7.83$).

Results

The percentages of participants who preferred Scenario B, which was more appealing to a competitive orientation, are shown in Table 1. The mean degree of positionality across all seven choices was estimated to be .52 (95% CI [.48, .56]). Participants were also asked in which of the two scenarios they would be happier. The mean degree of positionality across all seven choices was estimated at .56 (95% CI [.52, .60]). These findings suggest a substantially competitive orientation, as both estimates were much higher than .00. The latter finding even suggests a stronger competitive orientation than an individualist one.

Table 1. Summary of scenarios presented to participants and descriptive results in Study 1.

Choice	Scenario	Your status	Everyone else's status, on average	Degree of positionality (γ) if indifferent between A and B	Percent of participants who selected B	Percent of participants who would be happier with B
1	A	5.00	6.00			
2	B	5.00	4.00	0.00	75%	75%
3	B	4.75	4.00	0.13	66%	70%
4	B	4.50	4.00	0.26	64%	62%
5	B	4.08	4.00	0.50	53%	59%
6	B	3.67	4.00	0.76	44%	50%
7	B	3.50	4.00	0.88	31%	37%
	B	3.33	4.00	1.00	27%	29%

It is worth noting that these findings indicate a strongly competitive but not wholly competitive orientation toward status (i.e., the mean degree of positionality was less than 1.00). In contrast, the findings from our first test suggested a wholly competitive orientation toward status. This discrepancy might have emerged because, as has been noted before, people downplayed their competitive preferences out of social desirability (Carlsson et al., 2007). That is, participants in our second test might have wanted to avoid appearing competitive.

We again did not find evidence for systematic individual differences in responses to these status questions, similar to our first test. This again suggests that competitive orientation concerns for status cut across a wide range of individuals (see SOM for further details).

Summary. This second study again found evidence for a competitive orientation towards status. Participants were willing to “give up” a significant amount of absolute status – that is, to be less respected and to receive less deference on an absolute level – if it meant receiving more respect and deference than others received. In direct comparisons of the strength of the two orientations, it was found that participants had at least as strong a competitive orientation as they had an individualist orientation, if not stronger (depending on the specific question asked).

Discussion

Together, these two studies suggest that the human desire for status is very competitive in nature: participants sought to have higher status than others, above and beyond simply having high status. That is, participants wanted to be accorded a higher level of respect than others, above and beyond simply wanting to be respected. These findings are important for a number of reasons. First, as mentioned in the Introduction, these findings might help explain the pervasiveness of status hierarchies. Individuals might generate and perpetuate status inequality by continually striving to receive more respect and deference than others, rather than being satisfied with an egalitarian social structure in which everyone is respected and where everyone’s voice is heard equally.

Second, the current results might shed light on well-established phenomena in the psychological literature, such as why people feel competitive with friends (Tesser, 1988), why they are happier when others around them are worse off economically (e.g., Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010), and why they desire to have a better education or bigger house than others (e.g.,

Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). It is possible that the fundamental human desire for status, with its competitive nature, might help drive these kinds of behaviors.

Finally, the current findings speak to ways in which one might mitigate the deleterious consequences of possessing low status, which include lower psychological well-being and even physical illness. If people had an individualist orientation toward status, then one way to lessen such damage might be to raise everyone's status (Tyler & Blader, 2002). However, our findings suggest that such methods will not suffice. As long as some people are lower in status than others they will suffer. Therefore, other interventions might be necessary. For example, one possibility would be to minimize the importance of status to one's well-being in the first place, through techniques such as self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Author Contributions: The first author (CA) designed the project. The corresponding author (JADH) conducted the experiments. CA performed the statistical analyses. CA and JADH analyzed the findings. CA and JADH wrote the manuscript.

Author Information: All data, measures and materials is available from the Open Science Framework at the following link:

https://osf.io/pwkxd/?view_only=ab27c9bd191449d096c56837c9a4031e

Acknowledgments. We thank Don Moore and Clayton Crichton for providing comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The authors declare no competing financial interests.

References

- Adler, N. E., Epel, E. S., Castellazzo, G., & Ickovics, J. R. (2000). Relationship of subjective and objective social status with psychological and physiological functioning: Preliminary data in healthy, White women. *Health Psychology, 19*(6), 586-592.
- Alpizar, F., Carlsson, F., & Johansson-Stenman, O. (2005). How much do we care about absolute versus relative income and consumption? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 56*(3), 405-421.
- Ames, D. R., Rose, P., & Anderson, C. P. (2006). The NPI-16 as a short measure of narcissism. *Journal of Research in Personality, 40*(4), 440-450.
- Anderson, C., & Brown, C. E. (2010). The functions and dysfunctions of hierarchy. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 30*, 55-89.
- Anderson, C., Hildreth, J. A. D., & Howland, L. (2015). Is the desire for status a fundamental human motive? A review of the empirical literature. *Psychological Bulletin, 141*(3), 574-601.
- Anderson, C., John, O. P., Keltner, D., & Kring, A. M. (2001). Who attains social status? Effects of personality and physical attractiveness in social groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*(1), 116-132.
- Anderson, C., Willer, R., Kilduff, G. J., & Brown, C. E. (2012). The origins of deference: when do people prefer lower status? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*(5), 1077-1088.
- Belmi, P. & Lauren, K. (in press). Who wants to get to the top? Class and lay theories about power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

- Boyce, C. J., Brown, G. D. A., & Moore, S. C. (2010). Money and happiness: Rank of income, not income, affects life satisfaction. *Psychological Science*, 21, 471–475.
- Buss, D. M. (1999). Human nature and individual differences: The evolution of human personality. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 31–56). New York, NY: Guilford Press
- Carlsson, F., Johansson-Stenman, O. L. O. F., & Martinsson, P. (2007). Do you enjoy having more than others? Survey evidence of positional goods. *Economica*, 74, 586-598.
- Côté, S., House, J., & Willer, R. (2015). High economic inequality leads higher-income individuals to be less generous. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(52), 15838-15843.
- Diener, E., Diener, M., & Diener, C. (1995). Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 851.
- Diener, E. D., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of personality assessment*, 49(1), 71-75.
- 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(6), 1123-1137.
- Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big-Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(6), 504-528.
- Gruenfeld, D.H., & Tiedens, L. (2010). Organizational preferences and their consequences. In S.T. Fiske, D.T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 1252– 1287). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

- Heatherton, T. F., & Polivy, J. (1991). Development and validation of a scale for measuring state self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(6), 895-910.
- Hsieh, C. C., & Pugh, M. D. (1993). Poverty, income inequality, and violent crime: a meta-analysis of recent aggregate data studies. *Criminal Justice Review*, 18(2), 182-202.
- Johansson-Stenman, O., Carlsson, F., & Daruvala, D. (2002). Measuring future grandparents' preferences for equality and relative standing. *The Economic Journal*, 112, 362-383.
- Jong-Sung, Y., & Khagram, S. (2005). A comparative study of inequality and corruption. *American Sociological Review*, 70(1), 136-157.
- Kawachi, I., Kennedy, B. P., Lochner, K., & Prothrow-Stith, D. (1997). Social capital, income inequality, and mortality. *American Journal of Public Health*, 87(9), 1491-1498.
- Magee, J. C., & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). 8 Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2(1), 351-398.
- Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(5), 890-902.
- Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (38th ed.), (pp. 183-240). Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.
- Solnick, S. J., & Hemenway, D. (1998). Is more always better? A survey on positional concerns. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 37(3), 373-383.

- Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21, 181–227.
- Tversky, A., & Griffin, D. (1991). Endowment and contrast in judgments of well-being. In R. J. Zeckhauser (Ed.), *Strategy and choice* (pp. 297-318). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Tyler, T. R., & Blader, S. L. (2002). Autonomous vs. comparative status: Must we be better than others to feel good about ourselves? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 89(1), 813-838.
- Van Lange, P. A. (1999). The pursuit of joint outcomes and equality in outcomes: An integrative model of social value orientation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(2), 337-349.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: the PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063-1070.
- Willer, R. (2009). Groups reward individual sacrifice: The status solution to the collective action problem. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 23-43.

Supplemental Online Methods

Study 1: Additional results

There were was not a significant interaction between *own* and *others' status*, $F(1, 225) = 0.96, p = 0.33, \eta^2 = 0.004$.

We examined whether individual difference variables moderated the importance of relative or absolute status to well-being. We first examined whether any of the individual difference variables – gender, age, ethnicity, and seven different personality traits – moderated the effects of *own status* or *others' status* on well-being. Out of 20 possible interactions, only one was significant, which is what one would expect by chance. Specifically, agreeableness moderated effect of others' status on well-being, $F(10, 225) = 2.76, p = 0.034$. We next examined whether any of the individual difference variables moderated the effects of *others' status* when *own status* was either high or when it was low. Out of these 20 analyses, again only one result was significant: specifically, when *own status* was high, emotional stability moderated the effect of *others' status*, $F(11, 225) = 3.15, p = 0.035$. Additionally, we examined whether any of the individual difference variables moderated the comparison between the high-high condition (in which both *own* and *others' status* was high) and the low-low condition (in which *own* and *others' status* was low). Out of these 10 analyses, only one was significant: emotional stability moderated the effects of the two conditions, $F(11, 90) = 2.34, p = 0.017$. Altogether, therefore, there was not systematic evidence for individual differences in the importance of relative or absolute status; very few significant effects emerged, they were inconsistent across measures, and they were inconsistent across the two studies.

Study 2: Additional results

We examined whether individual difference variables predicted the likelihood of selecting Scenario B, or predicted concerns for relative status. The results of simultaneous logistic regressions are shown in Table S2. We included the choice they were presented as a control, as well as results from the Big Five personality dimensions measured via the TIPI, and all demographic variables assessed, for the sake of thoroughness. As shown, no individual difference variable consistently predicted selecting Scenario B. Out of the 34 possible relationships, only one reached significance: The desire for status significantly predicted a stronger preference for relative status, but this relationship was modest in magnitude (Odds ratio = 1.295, 95% CI = [1.085, 1.547]) and did not hold up in predicting happiness judgments. Therefore, these analyses do not provide compelling evidence for systematic individual differences in the preference for relative status over absolute status.

Table S1. Study 1 (false) ratings provided to all participants which were used as the basis for participants' status ratings.

	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Extraversion	Emotion Recognition Skill
Possible Range:	1 (low) – 7 (high)	1 (low) – 7 (high)	1 (low) – 7 (high)	0 (low) – 24 (high)
Member A	3.5	6.0	4.0	17
Member B (you)	-	-	-	-
Member C	4.0	4.5	5.5	9
Member D	1.5	3.0	5.5	4
Member E	6.0	3.0	2.5	20

Table S2. Study 2 Individual difference predictors of choosing Scenario B or reporting to be happier in Scenario B in simultaneous logistic regressions.

Predictor	Choosing Scenario B				Reporting being happier in Scenario B			
	B	SE	Wald	Sign.	B	SE	Wald	Sign.
Category	- 1.855	0.230	65.218	< 0.001	- 1.855	0.230	65.218	< 0.001
Current Income	0.012	0.046	0.071	0.792	0.012	0.046	0.071	0.792
Education	0.036	0.078	0.218	0.641	0.036	0.078	0.218	0.641
Male dummy	0.019	0.173	0.012	0.913	0.019	0.173	0.012	0.913
Race dummies								
- White	- 0.423	0.327	1.674	0.196	- 0.423	0.327	1.674	0.196
- African American	- 0.109	0.396	0.076	0.783	- 0.109	0.396	0.076	0.783
- Latino	- 0.188	0.374	0.252	0.616	- 0.188	0.374	0.252	0.616
- Asian	0.202	0.398	0.257	0.612	0.202	0.398	0.257	0.612
- Native American	0.889	0.730	1.484	0.223	0.889	0.730	1.484	0.223
Age	0.007	0.008	0.746	0.338	0.007	0.008	0.746	0.338
Narcissism	0.016	0.014	1.372	0.241	0.016	0.014	1.372	0.241
Desire for Status	0.206	0.109	3.556	0.059	0.206	0.109	3.556	0.059
Extraversion	- 0.010	0.057	0.029	0.865	- 0.010	0.057	0.029	0.865
Conscientiousness	0.102	0.072	1.997	0.158	0.102	0.072	1.997	0.158
Agreeableness	0.025	0.072	0.121	0.728	0.025	0.072	0.121	0.728
Emotional Stability	- 0.034	0.065	0.271	0.603	- 0.034	0.065	0.271	0.603
Openness	- 0.107	0.068	2.501	0.114	- 0.107	0.068	2.501	0.114
Constant	0.196	0.787	0.062	0.803	0.196	0.787	0.062	0.803