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Effects of inter-group status on the pursuit of intra-group status

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how the status of one's group influences intra-group behavior and collective outcomes. Two experiments provide evidence that, compared to members of low-status groups, members of high-status groups are more concerned about their intra-group standing, which in turn can increase both the likelihood of competitive and cooperative intra-group behavior. However, whether the desire for intra-group standing manifests via competitive versus cooperative behavior depends on the relevance of the task to the group's inter-group standing. When the task is not clearly relevant to the group's status, members of high-status groups are more likely to engage in competitive behavior out of a desire to manage their intra-group status, which, in turn, leads to less desirable collective outcomes. However, when the group's status is at stake, members of high-status groups seek intra-group status via cooperative behavior, leading to better collective outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The desire for status is often referred to as a fundamental human need (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Barkow, 1989; Maslow, 1943). The desire for status is not limited to the amount of status individuals themselves have in social or organizational contexts, but spans across and operates at multiple levels; just as people want respect and a superior social position in the groups to which they belong (Frank, 1985; Maslow, 1943), they also want the groups to which they belong to be respected and to be seen as superior to other groups (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Indeed, much of competitive and cooperative patterns of individual and group behavior has been shown to, at least in part, have its root in people's desire for status (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Festinger, 1954; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Given its importance and ubiquity in everyday social life, it is not surprising that social scientists have given significant thought to status and how status can be gained, lost, and maintained. Yet, much of this prior work has not distinguished between the desire for one's group to be high-status and the desire to be a high-status member of one's group. Rather, these two desires are typically studied and theorized independently from one another, without explicit consideration as to how they might jointly affect intra-group behavior (Anderson et al., 2015; Ellemers & Barreto, 2000;

Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Further, prior work has found that the desires for inter- and intra-group status might lead to different member behavior. For example, research in inter-group relations has shown that individuals who want to improve the group's status will often engage in collective action that enhances or maintains the group's status, even at the cost of their personal interests (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Ellemers, Doosje, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992). Research on intra-group processes, by contrast, has suggested that status-oriented group members typically engage in competitive behavior toward other in-group members, even if at a cost to the group's best interests (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). In the present work, we attempt to bridge the divide between the work on inter- and intra-group status by exploring when individuals experience desire for intra- versus inter-group status and how they manage these desires through competitive versus cooperative behavior.

We suggest that the status of one's group may affect the extent to which group members want status within the group, but also that the way they pursue *intra*-group status – engaging with other group members competitively versus cooperatively – depends on their desire for *inter*-group status. Specifically, we propose that members of high-status groups are more concerned about intra-group status than members of low-status groups, potentially leading to more competitive and cooperative behavior vis-à-vis other group members. The decision to pursue intra-group status competitively versus cooperatively, however, depends on the extent to which members of high-status groups want to protect their group's status; when protecting the group's status is a salient goal, such as when a task is clearly relevant to the basis of the group's status,

they will refrain from engaging in competitive behavior and instead seek intra-group status by engaging in what is likely to be valued more by the group: cooperation. Stated differently, we argue that the salience of the concern for inter-group status will determine whether group members attempt to manage their intra-group status through competitive versus cooperative behavior, and this will be especially evident among members of high-status groups who experience stronger desire for intra-group status. In exploring this possibility, we also investigate how these different patterns of status pursuit affect collective processes and outcomes. In this way, the present work adds to our understanding of how group members manage their desire for intra-group status alongside the desire for inter-group status and under what conditions status-striving among group members can benefit or harm collective functioning.

1.1. The effect of inter-group status on concern for intra-group status

At the individual level, status is defined as the respect and esteem that individuals are granted by others on the basis of one's relative rank (Anderson et al., 2015; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). A host of positive effects come from being held in high standing within a group; with status comes greater control over resources and influence over group outcomes (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Similarly, group status is construed as how positively viewed a group is by others on the basis of its relative rank within a social system (Ellemers & Barreto, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this instance, too, status confers similar benefits for members of high-status groups; being a member of a high-status group is associated with higher self-esteem, greater access to resources, and more influence over outcomes (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Although the desire for both intra- and inter-group status is thought to be a fundamental human need (Anderson et al., 2015; Maslow, 1943; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people seem to want status more when their group is high status than low status. For example, group members are typically more strongly identified with high-status groups than with low-status groups (Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers et al., 1992). In-group identification, in turn, increases the extent to which members are concerned about their intra-group status; individuals want acceptance and respect from groups with which they are more strongly identified, as evidenced by increased compliance and conformity among highly-identified group members (Tyler & Blader, 2002; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996). Group members also find it more rewarding to be respected by other group members (or to have higher status within the group) when their group is high status than when their group lacks status (Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998) and it is more hurtful to group members to not be respected by the group when they perceive their group to be high status than when they think it is low status (Duguid, 2011; Duguid, Loyd, & Tolbert, 2012). We thus predict that members of high-status groups, as compared to members of low-status groups, will be more concerned about their intra-group status.

Hypothesis 1. Members of high-status groups will be more concerned with their intra-group status than members of low-status groups.

1.2. The effect of intra-group status concern on competitive and cooperative behavior

One perspective on status dynamics in groups has suggested that status striving among group members is essentially a competitive process, with each member attempting to outdo other members or to prevent others from outdoing them (Barkow, 1989;

Frank, 1985). In fact, desire for status has been shown to be one of the primary drivers of competitive behavior (Festinger, 1954; Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013). For example, concern about one's status position causes competitive behavior toward other members, such as withholding help from others (Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010), not acknowledging the contributions of other group members (Menon & Pfeffer, 2003), and even sabotaging other members (Charness, Masclet, & Villeval, 2014).

Yet, group members can also pursue status by engaging in cooperative, other-enhancing behaviors. Functionalist perspectives on status attainment suggest that group members' intra-group status standing is determined by the extent to which the individual is seen positively within the group by demonstrating the ability to promote group outcomes (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009) or commitment to the group's success (Ridgeway, 1987; Willer, 2009). As such, concern about intra-group status can also lead to cooperative intra-group behaviors. Consistent with this point, prior work has found that one's concern for others, as measured by one's attentiveness to fairness (Blader & Chen, 2011, 2012) and willingness to engage in perspective taking (Blader, Shirako, & Chen, 2016), increases as one seeks to manage one's status. Research has also shown that group members who want status will offer help to other in-group members (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006) and even engage in self-sacrificial behavior on the behalf of other group members (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). Moreover, voluntarily helping others by providing one's expertise and unique information such as know-hows and know-whoms can be an effective means through which group members can express their value to the group, ultimately increasing their status within the group (Cheshire, 2007).

Given these two perspectives, when will group members engage in competitive versus cooperative behaviors in order to manage their intra-group status? We propose that the way group members pursue their status within the group is context-dependent, particularly on the extent to which group members believe competitive and cooperative behavior will be condemned or rewarded, respectively, by other group members (Anderson et al., 2015; Torelli, Leslie, Stoner, & Puente, 2014). Importantly, while competitive and cooperative behaviors are typically conceptualized and empirically investigated as being on opposite ends of a single continuum (i.e., high levels of cooperation are equivalent to low levels of competition), we distinguish them for two reasons. First, in many interpersonal and social situations, that one does not help others to achieve their interests does not necessarily mean that one must also interfere with others' ability to achieve their interests, and vice versa (e.g., Dalal, 2005). Second, as reviewed above, individuals who seek status in groups have been shown to use both competitive and cooperative behaviors (Flynn et al., 2006; Garcia et al., 2013; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Hays & Bendersky, 2015), and both types of behaviors can independently help status-concerned individuals attain or maintain their status (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012). As such, distinguishing competitive behavior from cooperative behavior may offer insights into understanding how group members' concern for status are differentially enacted. In the following section, we detail how one specific contextual factor – the relevance of the task at hand for the group's inter-group status – might affect whether the concern for intra-group status will manifest in competitive versus cooperative intra-group behavior.

1.3. Task relevance to group status and its effects on competitive and cooperative behavior

Group status is often determined on the basis of the group's past achievements or its expected future achievements on a dimension that a particular inter-group hierarchy agrees to be important (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Schmader,