Cultural determinants of status: Implications for workplace evaluations and behaviors

Carlos J. Torelli [a,*], Lisa M. Leslie [c], Jennifer L. Stoner [a], Raquel Puente [b]

[a] Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, United States
[b] Departamento Mercadeo y Negocios Internacionales, Universidad Icesi, Colombia and Centro de Mercadeo, Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, Venezuela
[c] Stern School of Business, New York University, United States

ABSTRACT

Status is a valued workplace resource that facilitates career success, yet little is known regarding whether and how cultural orientation affects status attainment. We integrate status characteristics theory with the literature on individualism and collectivism and propose a cultural patterning in the determinants of status. Four studies ($N = 379$) demonstrate that cultural orientation influences the tendency to view high status individuals as competent versus warm (Study 1), uncover cultural differences in both individuals' tendency to engage in competence and warmth behaviors to attain workplace status (Study 2) and evaluators' tendency to ascribe status to individuals who demonstrate competence versus warmth (Study 3), and verify that cultural differences in the effects of competence and warmth on status perceptions, and in turn performance evaluations, generalize to real world interdependent groups (Study 4). Our findings advance theory on the cultural contingencies of status attainment and have implications for managing diversity at work.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

From the standing of countries on a global scope to the arrangement of individuals according to their station in life, social hierarchy—defined as "an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension" (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 354)—is so prevalent in human societies that it is a defining feature of social relations. Social hierarchy is not only a fundamental aspect of societies; it also serves two important functions in organizations and is therefore inherent to work settings. Specifically, social hierarchy facilitates the coordination of activities necessary to achieve organizational goals and incents employees to achieve high levels of performance as a mechanism for moving up in rank (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1987; Durkheim, 1997; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Marx, 1964; McClelland, 1975; Tannenbaum, Kavcic, Rosner, Vianello, & Wieser, 1974; Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976; Weber, 1946). Given the centrality of social hierarchy to the process of organizing, it is not surprising that a literature has emerged on the consequences of a primary dimension of social hierarchy—status—for a range of organizational phenomena, including team processes and outcomes, trust, communication,

procedural fairness, workplace deviance, and exchange relationships, among others (e.g., Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Castellucci & Ertug, 2010; Chen, Brockner, & Greenberg, 2003; Christie & Barling, 2010; Flynn, 2003; Fragale, 2006; Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009; Lount & Pettit, 2012; Perretti & Negro, 2006). Status, defined as the extent to which an actor is respected and highly regarded in the eyes of others (cf. Blau, 1964; Goldhamer & Shils, 1930; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995; Zelditch, 1968), is an important commodity inside and outside of organizations. People are concerned with achieving and maintaining status, which in turn has desirable consequences (e.g., Frank, 1985; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). Indeed, as compared to low status individuals, high status individuals are more likely to be trusted by and receive help from others (Lount & Pettit, 2012; Van Der Vegt, Bunderson, & Oosterhof, 2006), less likely to be negatively evaluated for deviant behavior (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010), and more likely to receive inflated performance evaluations and to be given opportunities to succeed (Darley & Gross, 1983; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). It is therefore not surprising that the question of how individuals attain and maintain high status has been a topic of interest to scholars (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009a, 2009b; Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). One robust conclusion within this literature is that perceived competence (i.e. agency, ability, efficacy, confidence) is a key determinant of status; competent individuals and groups achieve high status and, conversely, high status individuals and groups are also viewed as competent by others (e.g., Berger

* Corresponding author. Address: Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, 321 – 19th Avenue S, Suite 3-150, Minneapolis, MN 55455, United States. Fax: +1 612 624 8804.

E-mail address: ctorelli@umn.edu (C.J. Torelli).

et al., 1980; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Moreover, the link between competence and status has been replicated in many cultures, suggesting that this relationship may be pancultural (Cuddy et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, there are several reasons to question the universality of status attainment (i.e. what type of individual comes to be viewed as high status by others). First, recent research shows that culturally-nurtured views of power—a related but distinct dimension of social hierarchy—vary significantly, such that power is viewed as a mechanism for advancing one's own interests among individuals with certain cultural orientations but as a mechanism for advancing the interests of others among individuals with other cultural orientations (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010). Second, theories of status attainment suggest that the determinants of status are context-dependent and thus allow for the possibility of cultural contingencies. More specifically, a key tenet of status characteristics theory is that individuals attain high status if they possess characteristics that are valued in a given setting (i.e. status characteristics, e.g., Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Perceived competence is a valued status characteristic in organizations and other task-oriented groups, yet decades of research demonstrate that valued social characteristics vary widely among individuals with different cultural orientations (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2005). The robust linkage between competence and status is consistent with values and norms among those with an individualistic cultural orientation, who emphasize personal goals of achievement, success, and self-reliance (Triandis, 1995); however, those with a collectivistic cultural orientation emphasize sociability and interdependence (Triandis, 1995), which suggests that judgments regarding individuals' generosity, kindness, and friendliness (i.e. interpersonal warmth) may also contribute to status judgments. We therefore integrate status characteristics theory with research on cultural differences in individualism and collectivism and propose that the tendency to view competence and warmth—the two fundamental dimensions of person perception (Asch, 1946; Cuddy et al., 2009; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998)—as determinants of status is a function of individuals' cultural orientation.

We investigate this proposition in four studies. We first demonstrate the basic phenomenon by showing that individualism is positively related to the tendency to perceive high status individuals as competent, whereas collectivism is positively related to the tendency to perceive high status individuals as warm (Study 1). We then investigate the relevance of cultural differences in status attainment for organizations by showing that cultural orientation is related to the behaviors individuals engage into acquire status at work (Study 2) and the behaviors evaluators use to ascribe status to others (Study 3). Finally, we document that culture influences the association of competence and warmth with status in interdependent task groups, and that status has consequences for an important workplace outcome: appraisals of group members' performance (Study 4). Across studies, we operationalize culture using two different measures of individual-level cultural orientation, as well as participants from cultural groups known to vary in their cultural orientation (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004), and thus provide strong support for a cultural patterning in the determinants of status. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that status attainment is not pancultural, but is sensitive to differences in individualism and collectivism. Our findings therefore have important implications for managing cultural diversity at work.

Theory development

Status characteristics theory provides a useful framework for understanding status attainment in task-oriented groups—that is—why some group members earn respect and admiration in the eyes of other group members, but others do not (e.g., Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Webster & Driskell, 1978). According to status characteristics theory, status attainment is driven by the extent to which group members are perceived to possess status characteristics, defined as traits that are valued in the setting because they are positively associated with expectations of future performance. Specifically, individuals expect that group members who possess valued status characteristics will achieve high performance in the future and therefore respect those group members and afford them positions of high status within the group. Alternatively, group members perceived to lack valued status characteristics are afforded positions of low status (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980).

In organizations and other task-oriented groups, competence (i.e. intelligence, agency, ambition) is considered critical for achieving strong performance. It is therefore not surprising that "the basis of respect in organizations is competence, or more precisely, judgments about a target individual's competence" (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 373). Indeed, a large body of research demonstrates that perceived competence is a valued status characteristic. For example, the degree of competence demonstrated by an employee is positively associated with the degree of status ascribed to that employee by others (Sutton & Hargadon, 1996) and, conversely, evaluators assume that individuals assigned to high status positions (e.g., managers) are more competent than individuals assigned to a low status position (e.g., clerks)—even when aware that position assignments are random (Humphrey, 1985; Sande, Ellard, & Ross, 1986).

Research has focused on perceived competence as the key antecedent of status in organizations and other task-focused groups, yet status characteristics theory also allows for variation in the determinants of status. Specifically, status characteristics are characteristics that are valued in a given setting because they are positively associated with expectations of future performance. To the extent that valued characteristics vary across settings, there may also be variation in the determinants of status (cf. Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Fragale, 2006). Consistent with this notion, there is some evidence that perceived warmth, like perceived competence, at times determines who attains status. For example, early research found that some members of problem-solving groups acquire status based on their task ability (i.e. competence), whereas others acquire status based on their socio-emotional ability (i.e. warmth) (e.g., Slater, 1955), and more recent evidence indicates that individuals at times engage in prosocial, helping-oriented behaviors that demonstrate warmth as a mechanism for achieving status (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006). In addition, one study provided insight into when competence versus warmth is a stronger determinant of status. Specifically, individuals who used speech styles that conveyed competence attained status when working on an individual task, but individuals who used speech styles that conveyed warmth attained status when working on an interdependent task (Fragale, 2006). This finding is consistent with status characteristics theory, which suggests that status characteristics (competence versus warmth) depend on what is valued in the setting (task type).

Prior theory substantiates that the determinants of status depend on task type, yet there is reason to believe that the characteristics associated with status are also a function of individuals' cultural orientation, even among individuals working on the very same task. Specifically, abundant research substantiates that cultural orientation is a robust source of differences in valued social characteristics (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2005). An integration of research on cultural orientation—and specifically on individualism and collectivism—with status characteristics theory therefore suggests that the determinants of status are culturally-contingent.