

Accurate When It Counts: Perceiving Power and Status in Social Groups

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Several years ago, one of us came across an advice book titled *30 Things Everyone Should Know How To Do Before Turning 30* (Adcock, 2003). Said milestone having already passed, your correspondent was interested in knowing what crucial age-appropriate expertise he did or did not possess, intending to brush up if needed. Amid instructions on how to change a car tire (check), open a Champagne bottle (check), and fold a fitted sheet (really?) was a chapter on how to win the affections of cats and dogs that you have just met.

The key to interacting successfully with cats and dogs, apparently, is to understand the two questions that the animal most cares about, and then to provide a suitable answer. And it turns out that cats and dogs are interested in very different things. For cats, who are solitary hunters, the two key questions are “What the hell is that?” and “Is it mine?” (Hence cats’ endless fascination with laser pointers.) But for dogs, highly social animals that run in packs, the two key questions are “Who is dominant?” and “Who likes me?”

These questions resonated with this particular reader on both a personal and professional level (and not just because he is more of a dog person). A recurring theme in psychology and other social sciences is that two similar dimensions organize much of human interpersonal life. These dimensions recur under a variety of different names and in different theoretical contexts, including agentic and communal modalities (Bakan, 1966), power and intimacy motivations (McAdams, 1985), status and love concerns in relationships (Foa & Foa, 1974), dominant and affiliative dimensions of personality

(Wiggins, 1991), competence and warmth in stereotype content (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), and strategies for “getting ahead” and “getting along” in the social world (Hogan, 1983). In a more abstract sense, the two recurring dimensions can be represented spatially as a vertical dimension, representing positions over or under one another in a hierarchy, and a horizontal dimension, representing interpersonal closeness or distance.

In social and personality psychology, a great deal of attention has been paid to the horizontal constructs – topics like closeness, intimacy, social support, etc. Vertical constructs have often been further in the background, as an important theme in research on intergroup processes and bases of social stratification like race, gender, and class. In recent years, however, there has been a growing emphasis among psychologists in conducting more explicit, basic research on vertical constructs like power, status, and influence (e.g., Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

Humans, perhaps as much as dogs, are interested in knowing who’s in charge in social situations. Our goal in this chapter is to consider how well people do at answering that question – figuring out the relative placement of self and others along vertical dimensions like power and status. We begin by reviewing definitions and critical conceptual issues in power and status, and we discuss how the hierarchical organization of power and status makes them different from horizontal constructs and from other attributes (like Big Five personality traits). We next consider different criteria and definitions for what it means to be “accurate” in perceiving power and status. Next, we report empirical findings on the accuracy of perceptions of status in small groups, showing that people are often quite good at perceiving the status of both self and others. Finally, we discuss the functions and consequences of accurate and inaccurate

perceptions of power and status, and address motivational factors that can increase or decrease accuracy. Our core assertion is that individuals who misperceive their place in a hierarchy will face social costs; these costs provide an incentive to perceive others and the self accurately.

Power, Status, and Other Vertical Constructs

Power, status, and related constructs are of great interest across the social sciences and humanities, so it should be of little surprise that there are a multiplicity of definitions and conceptual frameworks for studying them. Our goal in reviewing definitions is not to adjudicate a single best one for all purposes, but rather to draw out important issues and themes, and then to develop useful working definitions for interpersonal perception research.

Power

An important distinction among many definitions of power is that of “power-over” versus “power-to” (Allen, 2005). Power-over emphasizes the interpersonal components of power, as in power over another person. By contrast, power-to emphasizes an ability or capacity for action. For example, the marketing campaign for SAS (a software package for statistical analysis) touts that “SAS gives you the power to know.” This slogan is an illustration of power-to do something asocial (understand your data) but not necessarily power-over another person. Social and personality psychologists study power-to under a variety of other headings, such as research on self-efficacy and locus of control. Typically the term “power” is more commonly used in research on social structures and interpersonal relations, where the focus is on power-over (as is the case in this chapter).

A useful taxonomy of power-over definitions commonly used by social and personality psychologists was presented in a review by Fiske and Berdahl (2007). They identified three main themes among various definitions: power as influence, power as potential influence, and power as outcome control. If power is defined as influence, that means that a person with power causes another person to behave in a particular way. If power is defined as potential influence, that means that a person with power has the capacity or potential to cause another person's behavior (whether or not that potential is exercised). If power is defined as outcome control, that means that a person with power has control over outcomes that another person values.

Fiske and Berdahl noted a number of conceptual and practical problems with defining power as influence or potential influence. First, actual influence can only be determined after the fact, which is problematic for building empirically testable theories. Second, influence (both actual and potential) implies that a target person behaved or would behave in a way that complies with a powerful person's desires. Such a definition of power omits important situations where a powerful person may exercise power over someone who does not comply, such as when a leader punishes a subordinate for disobedience. Third, actual or potential influence definitions do not address where the influence comes from, and thus leave "influence" as merely a placeholder in defining power.

For these reasons, Fiske and Berdahl concluded that outcome control is the most conceptually defensible way of understanding power. Therefore, they defined power as "relative control over another's valued outcomes" (p. 679). The outcome-control approach draws heavily on interdependence theory (Emerson, 1962; Kelly & Thibaut,

1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), which provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding power in social relationships.

The outcome-control framework is useful for studying perceptions. Outcome control is a structural property of relationships that does not depend on any person's construal of a situation. Thus, one person may have power over another person even if one or both people do not realize it at a given time. (For example, a late-night TV host and the female intern he dates might both think about their relationship in purely romantic terms, but the fact that the host makes decisions about the intern's salary and career advancement means that he has power over her). Because the outcome-control framework separates psychological processes such as the perception of power from power *per se*, it is conceptually coherent to ask questions about the accuracy of perceptions.

This definition of power also makes clear that power is defined relative to a particular social situation. Power in one situation might be correlated with power in another situation (possibly due to stable structural variables like gender or class). However, such cross-situational consistency would be an empirical finding, not a definitional necessity as may be the case with personality traits (Funder & Colvin, 1991).

Status

A construct closely related to power is status. In organizational and social psychology and in sociology, "status" generally refers to the respect and prestige one has in the eyes of others (e.g., Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972).¹ It is possible to generate examples where power and status are dissociated: for example, a figurehead leader may have high status but little

power, and conversely a CEO's secretary may have a great deal of power to control outcomes within the organization but relatively little formal status. In many practical instances, however, power and status will be closely coupled.

Like power, status is a feature of a relationship (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). Like power, status may vary from one situation to another. And like with power, it is possible for a single individual to misperceive her own status or the status of another person. However, because status is about respect and prestige in the eyes of others, at its core it involves collective perceptions – that is, status is a component of reputation. Thus status is socially constructed in a different and perhaps more fundamental way than power. Whereas it might make sense to say that an individual has power but nobody knows it, it would not make sense to say the same about status. This gives status a complicated but necessary relation to interpersonal perceptions, which will become important when we consider what it means to be accurate in perceiving status.

Other Vertical Constructs

We can also briefly define several other vertical constructs that are related to power and status. As already discussed, *influence* is the capacity to affect others' behavior. In many situations an individual with power (in the sense of outcome control) can use that power to exert influence over others (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). Thus influence is often a consequence of power. Trait *dominance* refers to stable individual differences in a tendency to seek and exercise power, status, or influence (Gough, McCloskey, & Meehl, 1951); in the Big Five trait taxonomy, dominance is most strongly correlated with extraversion (John & Srivastava, 1999). Drawing on literature on social inequalities, we can define *privilege* as discrepancies based on group membership, such as race or gender

or class, that result in better outcomes and greater outcome control for members of one group than for another (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; McIntosh, 1988). Thus, dominance and privilege can be personal or structural antecedents to power.

Hierarchical Organization of Power and Status

As we have defined them, power and status are intrinsically social. Power is a structural feature of relationships, concerning the control that one person has over another person's valued outcomes. Status is a reputational variable, concerning how one person is viewed in the eyes of others. Power and status share this intrinsic sociality with horizontal dimensions like closeness and liking. However, power, status, and other vertical dimensions have particular characteristics that make them distinct.

In group contexts, power and status are typically arranged into hierarchies (Owens & Sutton, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1979; Sluckin & Smith, 1977). If too many individuals try to make decisions, issue commands, and dominate discussions, the group can encounter problems in trying to coordinate action. Hierarchies solve this problem by dividing influence and rights among group members: higher-status individuals have more freedom to make decisions and act on them, whereas low-status individuals are expected to defer to others (Goffman, 1967; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Higher power and status also come with greater rewards, such as a greater share of credit for a group's success. Hierarchies thus create a structure that rewards individuals who contribute to a group's success (Berger et al., 1972; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959).

An idealized power or status hierarchy is linear and transitive, meaning that if A is higher than B and B is higher than C, then A is higher than C (de Vries, 1998). To the extent that a real-world hierarchy approximates this idealized structure, advancement

through the hierarchy will be zero-sum: for C to rise up, B must fall down. This makes power and status quite different from horizontal dimensions like closeness.

Empirical evidence shows that real-world groups do approximate this idealized structure. Along vertical dimensions, individuals tend to spontaneously organize themselves into differentiated positions (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003); by contrast, individuals tend to converge toward similar positions along horizontal dimensions (Markey, Funder, & Ozer, 2003). Furthermore, people derive more satisfaction and cooperate more effectively in dyadic and group relationships that follow a pattern of vertical differentiation and horizontal convergence (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Horowitz et al., 2006; O'Connor & Dyce, 1997; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

The hierarchical organization of power and status also suggests a particular pattern of entanglement between self-perceptions and perceptions of others. An individual who perceives the self as relatively high up in a hierarchy and who acts on this belief may consequentially treat others as relatively lower (Blau, 1964). This suggests that inaccurate perceptions of power or status can have objective consequences in a social situation. These consequences may be asymmetric. An individual who self-enhances (views the self as having higher power or status than is warranted) can provoke conflict and disorganization if the individual tries to claim the rights and rewards of a high position. By contrast, an individual who self-effaces (views the self as lower than warranted) will be less socially disruptive, though he or she may leave rewards on the table (Anderson et al., 2006). These tradeoffs and asymmetries are at the core of our predictions about how and why people will be motivated to perceive status accurately.

Defining Accuracy for Power and Status

What does it mean to be “accurate” in an interpersonal perception? Researchers have wrestled with this problem for a long time (e.g., Cronbach, 1955; Funder, 1995; Kenny & Albright, 1987; Kruglanski, 1989; Robins & John, 1997). Broadly, the accuracy of a perception can be defined as the correspondence between the perception and reality. A researcher studying accuracy must therefore define what is meant by reality and what it means to correspond to it. Both of these issues present deep conceptual challenges.

What is Reality?

A key issue that any researcher must address is the *criterion problem*: what is the yardstick by which accuracy is measured? A criterion commonly used in personality research is *social consensus* – agreement between two or more perceivers (one of whom may be the self). Using this criterion, an individual may be said to accurately perceive others (or the self) if the individual agrees with other observers.

Consensus applies differently to power than to status. In order for a group’s consensus judgment of power to be accepted as valid, the researcher should have reason to believe that a target person’s power over another is visible to the criterion judges. Such an assumption may or may not be justified, depending on whose power over whom is being assessed. At a minimum, judges must have information about the target person being assessed and the person(s) over whom the target may or may not have power. Additionally, in some areas power may be hidden from some group members; for example, researchers who study privilege may have reason to suspect that members of dominant groups are unaware of their group’s advantages over some other social groups (Lowery et al., 2007).

Status is a reputational construct, defined as one's standing in the eyes of group members. Thus, unlike with power, the social consensus of group members is the very definition of status. If every member of a group agrees that one member has low status, then by definition that individual has low status in that group. Some individuals within a group may still be inaccurate, however, if they depart from the group consensus.

What is Correspondence?

The other half of the accuracy definition is correspondence. What does it mean to say that a perception corresponds to a criterion? Cronbach (1955) presented a careful decomposition of the different components that contribute to discrepancies between perceptions and criterion scores. Cronbach derived the decomposition for cases where each perceiver rates multiple target persons on multiple attributes. In a simpler experimental design where each perceiver rates each target person on a single attribute, we cannot distinguish all of Cronbach's components, but we can calculate two kinds of correspondence that carry different interpretations.

First, we can compare the average level of perceptions relative to the criterion scores: for example, do perceivers see targets as having more power or less power than the criterion scores indicate? Such *elevation accuracy* is what is implied by the notion of overestimating versus underestimating a target's status (and when the target is the self, between self-enhancing versus self-effacing).²

Second, we can calculate the correlation between individual differences in perceivers' ratings and criterion scores: does the relative ordering of perceptions match the relative ordering of the targets being perceived? Whereas elevation accuracy is based

on comparisons of mean levels, *differential accuracy* is concerned with the rank ordering, which is particularly relevant to hierarchically organized variables like power and status.

Elevation and correlation are logically distinct, and it is not necessary for them to give converging results. For example, it is possible that perceivers might have little idea as to specific targets' relative power or status (poor differential accuracy), but they might not be biased to form especially high or low perceptions (good elevation accuracy). It is important to bear in mind that the two definitions of correspondence have substantively different interpretations: elevation accuracy reflects the extent to which perceivers neither overestimate nor underestimate; differential accuracy reflects the extent to which perceivers know relative positioning within a hierarchy.

Are People Generally Accurate?

How accurately do people perceive power and status? In order for an attribute to be perceived accurately, a necessary (but not sufficient) precondition is that the attribute must be associated with cues that can be detected by observers under realistic conditions (Funder, 1995). Power and status have a number of behavioral and appearance cues that observers could, in principle, rely upon. Extraverted and physically attractive individuals are more likely to attain status in groups (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001), and both extraversion and physical attractiveness are associated with highly visible cues (see Gosling, 2008, for a review). Powerful individuals experience greater positive affect, are less behaviorally inhibited, and regulate their emotions less than less-powerful individuals (Keltner et al., 2003; Srivastava & Ng, 2009). Trait dominance, often a precursor to social power and status, can be accurately perceived from as little information as a photograph, in part because individuals with dominant personalities tend

to have distinct facial features (Berry, 1991). Thus, cues to power and status should be available to perceivers who are able and willing to use them.

So are perceivers accurate? We believe that, when it comes to status (and in most instances power as well), the answer is frequently yes. Specifically, we have hypothesized that people are relatively good at perceiving status – as good or better than they are at perceiving other attributes like Big Five personality traits and social acceptance (Anderson et al., 2006). Status is a fundamental dimension of social organization, and as we discuss later in this chapter, misperceiving status can carry particularly costly social consequences (especially overestimating one's own status relative to others). In this section we present evidence that people are generally accurate when perceiving status. In the next section, we discuss in more depth the motivational reasons why people might be generally accurate. We also discuss motivational reasons why people might sometimes be inaccurate in perceiving power and status.

Some previous research using prepared stimuli suggests that perceptions of others' status may be accurate, even when perceptions are based on little information. For example, research on the Interpersonal Perception Test shows that perceivers agree with a criterion measure better than chance when judging status from videotapes (Costanzo & Archer, 1989). Similarly, in Schmid Mast and Hall (2004), participants who looked only at a photograph of two coworkers interacting were highly accurate in inferring which coworker had higher status. Other studies have looked at status judgments or cues in relation to traits that, theoretically, should be antecedents to status. For example, one study used videotapes of naturalistic dyadic interactions and found that judgments of assertive behavior were significantly correlated with the targets' trait assertiveness

(Schmid Mast, Hall, Murphy, & Colvin, 2003). Another study of ad hoc social groups, Kalma (1991) found that first impressions of trait dominance had predictive validity with respect to the amount that targets later spoke in a group interaction (a behavior that is highly related to status, therefore suggesting that the perceptions were accurate; Schmid Mast, 2002). All of these studies are highly suggestive that people may be accurate in judging status in naturalistic situations.

To more directly assess accuracy in perceiving the status of others and the self, we conducted a study of interpersonal perceptions in a naturalistic group setting (Anderson et al., 2006; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). Participants began the study as strangers, and they got to know one another in small group social interactions that occurred once a week for 4 weeks. At the end of each meeting, participants rated status and personality in a round-robin design, wherein each participant in a group rated every other participant in that group and also provided self-reports. Status and Big Five personality traits were rated with single items on a scale from 0 to 10. A total of $N = 152$ participants, assigned to 28 separate groups of 4 to 8 participants each, completed the study.

We analyzed the interpersonal perception data using the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). The SRM decomposes interpersonal perceptions into 4 components, using the following equation:

$$Y_{i,j} = G + P_i + T_j + R_{i,j}$$

In this equation, $Y_{i,j}$ is the rating that person i makes of person j . (For example, Ivan might think that John is moderately high in status, so he assigns him a 7 on a scale from 0 to 10.) G is the average rating in the group being analyzed. P_i is the *perceiver effect* for

person i ; it is defined as the rating that person i typically assigns to others (averaged across targets). T_j is the *target effect* for person j ; it is defined as the rating that others typically make of person j (averaged across perceivers). $R_{i,j}$ is a residual term that includes the *relationship effect* (the unique perspective that person i has of person j) plus error.

For peer-ratings made in group settings, each group member rates an overlapping but non-identical set of others. (For example, in a group of 3, Ivan rates John and Keith, John rates Ivan and Keith, and Keith rates Ivan and John.) For this reason, the perceiver and target effects cannot be calculated as simple averages. The equations for calculating unbiased estimates of perceiver and target effects in round-robin data were derived by Warner, Kenny, & Stoto (1979; see also Kenny, 1994).

As noted earlier, social consensus is definitional to status. Thus, we adopted social consensus as our criterion – specifically, we operationalized “actual” status as the mean rating given by members of the group.

Accuracy in Perceiving Others

Elevation accuracy. Because we were using social consensus as the accuracy criterion, it would be circular to ask whether perceivers are accurate on average (since by definition, being accurate means matching the average perceiver). However, one can ask a related question: how much do different perceivers within a group disagree about the base rate of status in that group? One perceiver may think that the members of her group are mostly important and influential, whereas another perceiver in the same group may think that the members of the group are mostly unimportant and unworthy of respect. Such differences can be thought of as a stereotype that varies from one person to the next

(either a stereotype of what people in general are like, or a stereotype of what the members of this particular group are like). These stereotypes, if they exist, will contribute to variance in the perceiver effect. Perceiver variance can also reflect other factors, such as scale usage and global evaluation, that affect perceptions of many different attributes (Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, in press). Therefore we compared the variance in perceiver effects of status to the variances for Big Five personality traits.

Larger perceiver variances reflect lower levels of elevation accuracy, because they indicate more disagreement among group members about the average level of status in that group. The perceiver variances, calculated as a proportion of total variance and then averaged across all 4 weeks of the study, are reported in Table 1. Perceiver effects accounted for 35% of the total variance in ratings of others' status. This was greater than the relative perceiver variance in ratings of extraversion and openness, and less than the perceiver variance in ratings of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. In other words, participants applied top-down stereotypes of a typical other's status about as much as they applied top-down stereotypes of a typical other's personality. In terms of elevation accuracy, participants were about as accurate when perceiving others' status as they were when perceiving others' personality.

Differential accuracy. Another definition of accuracy – and one that is probably more intuitive, especially for a hierarchically organized variable like status – is differential accuracy. Differential accuracy is a measure of whether the rank-ordering of perceptions corresponds to the rank-ordering of criterion scores. When comparing perceptions of status to a social-consensus criterion, the question becomes: do perceivers agree about who has high status and who has low status?

In the SRM, agreement about others' status will be reflected in target variance. The more that different group members agree with one another about who has high status and who has low, the greater the target variance will be as a proportion of total variance. Target variance for ratings of status and the Big Five personality traits is shown in Table 1. For status ratings, target variance was 28% of the total variance in ratings. This was greater than all personality traits except extraversion, a trait with such clear and immediate behavioral cues that it can be accurately rated from still photographs of strangers (e.g., Penton-Voak, Pound, Little, & Perrett, 2006). Thus, it appears that differential accuracy for status perceptions is quite good in comparison to perceptions of personality traits.

Accuracy in Perceiving the Self

In the same study, we also examined whether people are able to accurately perceive their own status in a group setting. These findings have been reported previously in slightly different form (Anderson et al., 2006); we summarize them here.

Elevation accuracy. Do people attribute more status to the self than they do to one another (self-enhancement)? Do they attribute less (self-effacement)? Theories of positive illusions have posited that self-perceptions are generally more positive than perceptions of other people because it is adaptive to see the self in a positive light (Pfeffer & Cialdini, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, we hypothesized the theory of positive illusions does not apply to status. Because it is so important to know one's own status in a group context, and because overestimating one's own status carries particular costs, we hypothesized that self-perceptions of status would either be neutral or even slightly self-effacing.

How do self-perceptions of status compare to perceptions of others? Table 2 shows means for self- and other-perceptions of status and Big Five personality traits. These analyses show that participants were slightly self-effacing in their ratings of status, with self-reports averaging about 0.40 scale points lower than other-reports (on a scale from 0 to 10). By contrast, participants were relatively neutral in their ratings of extraversion; and consistent with previous research, participants were self-enhancing in their ratings of other personality traits.

Differential accuracy. Self-other agreement – that is, the correlation between self-reported status and the group’s average rating of a person’s status (the consensus criterion) – is shown in Table 3. Averaging correlations across all 4 weeks of the study, self-other agreement for status was .42. This amount of agreement was close to that for extraversion (.46) and substantially higher than all other personality traits. Thus, we concluded that people agree where they fall in a group hierarchy as well as, or in most cases, better than they agree with where they fall in the rank-ordering of personality traits.

Other research. These findings also coincide with results from other studies. For example, in follow-up research that involved a laboratory assessment of task-focused groups and a field study of organizations, self- and peer-ratings of status did not significantly differ in mean level, indicating elevation accuracy, and correlated highly with each other, indicating high differential accuracy (Anderson, Gosling, & Ames, 2008). In a study of the status hierarchies that emerge on dormitory floors, we found self-perceptions agreed substantially with peer-ratings of status on the floor, again indicating differential accuracy (Anderson et al., 2001).

Motivations for Accuracy:

Self-Perceived Status and the Need to Belong

Our research indicates that people generally agree with one another about the relative ordering of status in a group setting, and have a pretty good idea about their own place within that ordering. If anything, people show a slight tendency to self-efface – a stark contrast to the positive illusions that people hold about a wide range of other attributes, including personality traits, intelligence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) and physical attractiveness (Heine & Lehman, 1997). So what is special about status?

We have hypothesized that people are reasonably accurate in perceiving status because misperceiving one's own status relative to others carries social costs (Anderson et al., 2006). Specifically, we proposed that individuals who overestimate their own place in a status hierarchy are disliked and rejected by other group members. Humans share a universal motivation to belong to groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, the threat of rejection would create a strong incentive to perceive one's own status accurately. And since knowing one's (relative) place involves both self-perception and other-perception, this hypothesis (if correct) would explain the accuracy people exhibit in perceptions of both self and others.

Why did we expect that groups would freeze out status self-enhancers? First, status self-enhancement may be threatening to other group members. The hierarchical organization of status means that when one individual claims high status, that individual is implicitly taking status away from others (Blau, 1964). Status self-enhancers may therefore be resented for illegitimately taking rewards or privileges that belong to others. Second, because status hierarchies provide stability and order, social groups have an

incentive to actively protect their hierarchies (Ridgeway, 1982; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). As we have noted earlier, status hierarchies dictate who may do what in group settings and help groups coordinate action. Individuals with high status are allowed to speak more often, can be more assertive about their opinions, and can tell others what to do (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). If too many individuals claim these privileges, it may be disruptive to group processes (“too many cooks spoil the broth”).

In our research, we have found substantial support for the hypothesis that status self-enhancement leads to social rejection (Anderson et al., 2008; Anderson et al., 2006). Our evidence comes from studies across a variety of group settings and using a variety of methods, including cross-sectional correlations; prospective longitudinal prediction, in which temporal variation in status self-enhancement acted as a leading indicator of upcoming rejection; and experimental manipulations, in which perceivers judged vignettes describing enhancers and effacers. Across these studies, rejection has been manifested in a variety of forms, most directly as feelings of dislike among fellow group members. These feelings of rejection lead, in turn, to lower self-esteem among status self-enhancers, as predicted by sociometer theory (see Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). In one study, rejection led to material costs for self-enhancers, in the form of lower monetary compensation given by other members for a group task (Anderson et al., 2008). We also found that individuals with the strongest need to belong were the most likely to avoid status self-enhancement (Anderson et al., 2006).

Furthermore, we have found evidence for the supporting hypothesis that status self-enhancement has a negative impact on group processes – a key reason why groups

should reject self-enhancers. Perceivers rate status self-enhancers as more socially disruptive (Anderson et al., 2008), and groups that contain more self-enhancers engage in more conflict, which in turn predicts worse scores on a group problem-solving task (Anderson et al., 2006).

If status self-enhancement is so costly, what about self-effacement: is it better to be modest, or does effacement have costs as well? We have generally found linear effects of enhancement versus effacement – in other words, group members have tended to like status self-effacers in our studies. Self-effacement may signal socially desirable selflessness, since effacers are foregoing credit for their contributions. Furthermore, self-effacement implies that others have higher status, which others may find rewarding. However, self-effacers may face other costs, such as the opportunity cost of leaving the rewards of status on the table. Furthermore, low self-perceived status is associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and greater use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (Srivastava & Ng, 2009). These personal costs may be more difficult for effacers to discern or to link to their effacement, and therefore the costs may not motivate accuracy to the same extent that the threat of social rejection does.

Motivations for Inaccuracy

Although we find that people are often reasonably accurate in perceiving status, it is by no means the case that all people are accurate all of the time. Indeed, our data show substantial room for inaccuracy of various kinds. In terms of elevation accuracy, although we find that the average person does not self-enhance on status, we always find some self-enhancers in our studies. In terms of differential accuracy, as noted in Table 2, target variance accounts for about a quarter of the total variance in ratings of status. Even

allowing for measurement artifacts and random error, there are probably many substantive sources of variance besides accuracy. In this section, we consider two motivational variables that may help explain why individuals can be inaccurate in perceiving their own status and power.

Narcissism and Admiration

Narcissists are individuals who are motivated to maintain an unrealistically positive self-concept (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists crave others' admiration and affirmation, and this desire is so intense that it can lead them to engage in behaviors that ultimately prove to be self-defeating.

Status self-enhancement appears to be one such behavior. Individuals who score high on a measure of trait narcissism are more likely to overestimate their status in a group setting (Anderson et al., 2008). At first this may seem paradoxical – narcissists, perhaps more than others, want to be loved. However, narcissists have difficulty controlling impulses and delaying gratification. “Many of narcissists’ behaviors may provide temporary immediate gratification of their desire for recognition, but it comes at the cost of long-term success” (Vazire & Funder, 2006, p. 155). Longitudinal research shows that the benefits of self-enhancement are often immediate, whereas the costs can take some time to emerge (Paulhus, 1998). When narcissists act like they are important and influential, they may immediately, though briefly, elicit complementary deferential behavior from others, especially in social situations with ambiguous hierarchies such as newly formed groups (Krebs & Denton, 1997). Rejection and ostracism come later, when the group hierarchy solidifies and group members finally realize that the narcissist’s claims of high status are not justified. Because of this delay, narcissists may be unable to

bring their self-perceptions in check – the social feedback that leads other people to back off may come too late to act as a disincentive for a narcissist.

Unearned Privilege and Positive Self-Image

We began this chapter by presenting separate definitions of power and status. Power is a structural property of social relations, whereas status is a component of reputation. Power may be used to acquire status and vice versa, and in practice they tend to be correlated, which is why we have largely discussed them together. However, unlike status, power and its antecedents can be invisible – and therefore can be plausibly denied. In this section we consider circumstances under which people may be motivated to inaccurately perceive the privileges that give them social power.

Noted socialite Paris Hilton once told an interviewer, “I work very hard and I’ve built this empire on my own” (Contact Music, 2008). Whether or not this is true, she almost certainly has benefited from growing up in a family with a net worth in the billions of dollars. However, people generally want to believe that their successes are due to personal, rather than external, causes (Miller & Ross, 1975). They may therefore have a strong motivation to downplay or even deny sources of privilege and power that are given to them rather than earned. For example, legacy admissions to college – which are unearned advantages given to the wealthy and well-connected – are the focus of much less public attention than affirmative action programs for the disadvantaged, and legacy admissions and other privileges are rarely discussed even by their beneficiaries (Chen & Tyler, 2003).

In a series of experiments focusing on Whites’ perceptions of racial inequalities, Lowery et al. (2007) tested the hypothesis that unearned privilege poses a threat to self-

esteem. They hypothesized that framing racial inequalities as White privilege would undermine Whites' self-serving attributions, whereas focusing on anti-Black discrimination would not. Lowery and colleagues showed that when White participants' self-image was threatened, they were more likely to deny that Whites benefit from unfair advantages (but they did not deny that Blacks are subject to unfair discrimination). Conversely, experimentally bolstering Whites' self-image made it easier for them to acknowledge unearned racial privilege. In another experiment, self-image threat diminished Whites' willingness to acknowledge institutional racism (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008).

Perversely, denial of privilege may lead the privileged to try to maintain social inequities. For example, when self-image threat leads Whites to deny that they benefit from race-based advantages, they are less likely to support public policies designed to alleviate racial inequalities (Lowery et al., 2007). Acknowledging unfair privilege seems to be a precursor to supporting its dismantlement.

Conclusions

People are relatively accurate, though not perfectly so, when perceiving power and status. In large part this is due to the consequences of inaccuracy, especially overestimation of the self relative to others. Status self-enhancement leads to social rejection, which people are generally motivated to avoid, creating a strong incentive to be accurate. Short-term self-aggrandizement may outweigh the long-term costs for narcissists, leading them to be systematically inaccurate. And unearned privileges may threaten the self-image, leading individuals to distort or deny the true sources of their social power.

By no means do we believe this is the last word on the motivational bases of accuracy and inaccuracy in perceptions of power and status. Our hypotheses and findings apply best to intact groups that remain together for a significant period of time, where the enhancement-rejection cycle has time to play out; in more transient groups this incentive may not apply. Furthermore, other motivations are likely to be relevant. For example, individuals with a strong need for power may have an incentive to accurately perceive and understand the hierarchies that they wish to climb. Conversely, individuals or groups with egalitarian or anarchistic values may find it aversive or threatening to acknowledge the existence of any hierarchy at all. We expect that a variety of other motivations, yet to be discovered, will help explain when and why people try to figure out who stands where in social groups.

Footnotes

1. In developmental psychology, the term “status” is sometimes used in a different way to refer to *sociometric status* – the extent to which one is liked and/or disliked by peers. That is not the meaning we are invoking here

2. In Cronbach’s (1955) more elaborate framework, some of his components would affect the elevation of perceptions of all attributes, and other components would only affect the elevation of a single attribute. Short of collecting and analyzing data in a full Cronbach-type design, it is useful to compare elevation for different attributes; this can help in distinguishing elevating effects due to general processes like acquiescence bias from elevation effects that are particular to a single attribute like status.

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Table 1

Relative Perceiver and Target Variances in Status and Big Five Personality Traits

	Perceiver variance	Target variance
Status	.35	.28
Openness	.31	.17
Conscientiousness	.44	.09
Extraversion	.21	.41
Agreeableness	.38	.11
Neuroticism	.54	.07

Note. $N = 152$. Data are averages from 4 measurement occasions. Perceiver variance is an index of disagreement about the average elevation other persons. Target variance is an index of agreement about the rank-ordering of other persons.

Table 2

Self-Other Agreement for Status and Big Five Personality Traits

	Self-perception mean	Other-perception mean	Self minus target (95% C.I.)
Status	5.32	5.72	-0.40 (-0.65, -0.15)
Openness	7.35	6.00	1.34 (1.08, 1.60)
Conscientiousness	7.39	6.33	1.06 (0.84, 1.28)
Extraversion	6.02	5.94	0.08 (-0.21, 0.37)
Agreeableness	7.10	6.38	0.72 (0.47, 0.96)
Neuroticism	4.40	3.58	0.82 (0.56, 1.09)

Note. $N = 152$ persons in 28 groups. Data were averaged across 4 measurement occasions. Because of group dependencies in the data, confidence intervals were calculated at the group level of analysis, not the individual level.

Table 3

Self-Other Agreement for Status and Big Five Personality Traits

	Self-other agreement
Status	.42
Openness	.24
Conscientiousness	.08
Extraversion	.46
Agreeableness	.22
Neuroticism	.20

Note. $N = 152$. Data are averages from 4 measurement occasions.