

# A trajectories based perspective on status dynamics

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After decades of taking a relatively static view on status, the last few years has seen an increasing interest in better understanding status from a dynamic perspective. In this review, we organize this recent research into three related areas: i) How do people respond to their own potential or actual status change?, ii) How do people respond to others' potential or actual status changes?, and iii) Who strives for status change? We focus specifically on integrating this work around the notion of status trajectories — namely, that people appear to see themselves and others on status trajectories, where past changes and/or current behaviors inform expectations of a 'status future' that they react to, and in some cases actively work to realize or to prevent.

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## Introduction

Status hierarchies are a constant and pervasive feature of social life. The composition and ordering of actors within a hierarchy are, however, not so constant or reliable. Shifts in the status of people and groups occur with surprising frequency. Indeed, we would venture that many (if not most) people reading this article can recall experiences discussing shifts in university rankings or colleagues whose standing has changed in the eyes of others. Moreover, even if some hierarchies are relatively stable [1], the subjective perspective that they *can* change is likely to matter to peoples' experiences and behaviors. Despite this, until recently, status research has had remarkably little to say about actual or anticipated status change, especially from a psychological perspective. This may be

due to a number of factors, including underlying beliefs that existing hierarchies are 'just' [2] that those who have status are 'naturally' predisposed to have it [3], or the influence of early trait models and individual differences that dominated related research on leadership emergence in groups [4,5]. Regardless of the reason(s), the vast majority of status research has taken a static view and considered status at only a single moment in time (see Ref. [6] for an exception). This orientation has unfortunately left us with little insight into even basic questions about status dynamics (e.g. How do people behave when they believe their own status might change? How do people behave when their status actually does change? How do people respond after others' status changes?).

The last decade has seen an uptick in research on status dynamics beginning with more basic questions (e.g. status maintenance versus attainment motives) and progressing toward integrative research that demonstrates the complexity of a dynamic perspective [7]. We organize this research into three areas: i) How do people respond to their own potential or actual status change?, ii) How do people respond to others' potential or actual status changes?, and iii) Who strives for status change?

## How do people respond to their own actual or potential status change?

Some of the first work on status dynamics examined how individuals respond to the potential for status change (gain versus loss). Specifically, though it has long been argued that striving for greater status is a fundamental human motive [8–10], people appear to assign an even higher value to avoiding status loss than to achieving a status gain [11\*]. People experience the possibility of losing status as threatening (e.g. elevated cortisol levels [12], higher blood and pulse pressure [13]) and are more willing to cheat to avoid it [14] than they are to achieve a status gain. This suggests that when status change is possible, peoples' primary motive is not to elevate their status, as prior work might imply, but instead to guard against status loss. This would further suggest that lower status people, who aspire to gain status, are less motivated by this potential than are the higher status people they seek to replace [15]. These dynamics may ultimately resolve with both higher and lower status people remaining 'in their place,' not because of passive acceptance or structural constraints, but instead because of the tension produced by their asymmetric efforts. Thus, while hierarchies obviously can and do change, it may be possible for an outwardly stable hierarchy to belie a far more unstable and conflictual experience for the actors who compose it [16–18].

Examining potential status changes has also offered insights into how people experience their status and to question long-standing functionalist assumptions about status hierarchies [19,20]. Because status is socially conferred, people cannot and do not possess status in the same way that they possess a tangible object. However, it is argued that people experience status as if it is their own [14] and it is this psychological coupling between the self and one's status that can — especially under conditions of potential status loss — lead people to act in ways that are detrimental to group goals [11\*]. This provides an important caveat to functionalist assumptions about hierarchies [21]. More specifically, a dynamic perspective on status demonstrates that people appear ready to withhold support and potentially undermine collective goals if acting for the group means they have the potential to lose status within it [22]. Overall, hierarchies assuredly provide some collective benefits; however, when personal status interests (i.e. to not surrender a status position that a person experiences as their own) collide with collective goals, the latter has the potential to suffer.

Building on this work on anticipated change, scholars have also begun to study how people respond to actual status changes [23\*\*,24,25\*]. These studies have shown that people who lose status become anxious [24] and require affirmation to recover [23\*\*]. Moreover, whereas potential status loss might bolster effort to avoid the loss, when status loss has actually occurred it appears to undermine effort and performance, particularly for higher status individuals (e.g. stars and high performers [23\*\*]).

Research on actual status gains has also demonstrated that gaining status may not provide uniformly positive outcomes, despite peoples' drive to do so. For example, when status gains are perceived to be 'unearned' — because they are achieved through a shift in what the organization values rather than through effort — the status gainer may experience discomfort [25\*]. Moreover, when individuals gain status their performance may suffer because they invest more time and resources helping their fellow group members and giving to the group [26], which could ultimately undermine their own performance [27\*\*]. Overall, this work speaks to how behavior and experience is a function of one's status and also how and why an individual arrived at their current position.

### How do people respond to others' actual or potential status changes?

Work on people's responses to *their own* status change is tightly related to work on people's reactions to *others'* actual or potential status change. Status is socially interdependent, and therefore others' status change is likely to shape expectations about one's own and others' future status. Previously relatively little was known about how change versus stability affects perceptions of the actors in our social world. However, given that we know that status

change influences people's own reactions (e.g. anxiety, performance) it seems reasonable that it would also influence how others perceive and react to those who experience status change.

Following this logic, Pettit *et al.* [28\*\*] introduced the concept of 'status momentum'. They demonstrate that, for people, products, and organizations, observers see a prior increase [decrease] in status as likely to lead to future increases [decreases]. Further, though momentum initially determines the direction of future rank estimations (above versus below the current rank), people's beliefs about a ranked actor's intentions refine the angle at which their trajectory is extrapolated [29]. Additionally, how leaders who experience status loss behave after the loss is crucial for their trajectory. Leaders who displayed self-control (e.g. persistence, professionalism) in the aftermath of status loss are able to reinforce perceptions of their legitimacy [30\*] and prevent the downward spiral that might otherwise be predicted by research on status momentum. Theoretically, this work makes a strong case for the value of looking beyond individuals' current status to understand perception and behavior. How an actor is perceived and responded to in the present appears to be a function of where this actor is expected to be in the future, which is inferred based on their past trajectory and their current behavior.

The insight that people perceive others as on status trajectories with expectations for the future raises questions of how people will behave during the status conferral process if they believe that another person's status trajectory has implications for their own status. Much prior work assumes that people passively accept who is initially conferred status based on their contributions to the group and their demographic and task-based attributes (i.e. 'status characteristics'). A dynamic perspective suggests that status conferral processes are not as passive and unchanging as the existing literature might imply. For instance, people who are extraverted [27\*\*] or with more dominant personalities [31] are initially granted higher status than others when groups form; however, these allocations change over time. These individuals tend to gradually lose status, perhaps because their performance falls short of the initially high expectations that other group members held for them. In contrast, people with more neurotic personalities — those who other group members might initially hold low expectation about but who exceed these over time — tend to gradually gain status [27\*\*].

People may also consider others' status trajectories and strategically manage against their own potential status loss by, in some cases, undermining the performance of those who threaten their place. Said another way, past changes and current realities create an anticipated future, and people take actions to prevent or realize this future.

For instance, people have been shown to be least likely to help the performance of co-workers who are currently most similar to them in status [22,32], which is argued to be a consequence of status-threat – a threat based on the expectation of another’s future status, which in turn, has implications for one’s own — and is done to protect against future status loss.

Overall, that people manage their status in this way, and that their behaviors appear to be reactions to the status trajectories that they envision for self and others, speaks to how the maintenance of the self becomes inserted into the dynamics of status conferral and contributes to its sometimes contentious nature [33,34]. Previously the calculus of status conferral was viewed as largely involving one variable: people’s expectations about a person’s relative willingness/ability to positively contribute to the group. This view implies that any adjustments to the hierarchy are based solely on changes in a person’s contributions, an assumption which is not fully supported in the work above. Instead, this research suggests that personal status concerns also enter the equation, and that people are reluctant to support or defer to (and may even undermine) members whose expected future status gain (due to their increasing value to the group) would mean a status loss for the self. Thus, the psychology of status conferral is perhaps best recast as a social dilemma, where people weigh their own personal status concerns (i.e. if another person gains or loses status what is the implication for my own status?) against collective interests (i.e. according status solely based on a person’s contribution to collective goals).

### Who strives for status change?

That people strive for status is a largely taken-for-granted motivation across a number of literatures [8]. Acknowledging this as a basic human drive simultaneously acknowledges that people see hierarchies as dynamic — why strive if one does not believe change is possible? At the same time, however, it does not appear that this motive is stable and invariant [35,36]. For instance, and counter to dominant assumptions about people’s desires for higher status, people who are ranked higher than they believe they deserve may try to lower themselves to a level that would be commensurate with the value they feel they can provide [37]. People may also conceal their high status to promote social harmony with lower status others [38]. As such, it is important to consider the conditions under which people want to change their status and the reasons that some people strive for status change more than others.

To better understand the contingencies of status striving, researchers have examined the psychological conditions under which high status is judged to be particularly valuable, and low status is considered especially aversive. It appears that the maintenance of the self plays an

important role in determining how much people seek higher status [39,40] and avoid lower status [41]. When people felt powerless or threatened they attached a higher willingness-to-pay to high-status goods, presumably because the psychological benefits of high status are particularly appealing under these conditions. This was observed despite the fact that people are typically reluctant to admit to status-striving — even those from Eastern cultures where status is arguably the most highly sought [42,43] — because of the stigma associated with such behavior [44]. As far as the self is concerned, gaining higher status has clear benefits, but the striving which facilitates status ascent has a potential cost all its own [45].

Overall, these results point to a robust but also complicated and potentially ambivalent relationship between status-striving and the self. People try to elevate their status to assuage self-threat and make costly trade-offs for status when their sense of self depends on the opinions of others [46]. And yet at the same time, people are aware that overtly striving for status can be stigmatizing, and therefore efforts to improve one’s status must be done with an awareness of how this behavior will be interpreted.

### Discussion

Recent research on status as a dynamic variable has provided a counterpoint and balance to the existing literature on status, which was dominated by a far more static view. This perspective has advanced the idea that people both anticipate and experience changes in their own and others’ status and this has implications for their self-concept and subsequent behavior. In other words, people appear to see themselves and others on status trajectories, where past changes and/or current behaviors inform expectations of a ‘status future’ that they actively work to realize or to prevent.

Although a dynamic approach to status is relatively new, a consideration of the relationship between status and expectations follows and builds upon a long tradition in the sociological literature. However, unlike Expectations States Theory [47], which focuses on status conferral processes and how expectations of a member’s future contributions to group goals determine patterns of influence, a dynamic approach to status considers expectations from the standpoint of people’s subjective perception of where their own and others’ status will be or could be in the future and the implications of these status forecasts for their own self-concept and behavior. More specifically, it appears that expectations also enter into, and perhaps even dictate, how people evaluate authority figures who have seen their status change (e.g. is this person meeting the behavioral expectations associated with their status?), and how they behaviorally respond to their own and/or others’ potential or actual status change (e.g. the actions people take, based on expectations of future status, to prevent or realize this

change). Overall, a dynamic approach to status that considers actors as on trajectories articulates a deeper and more elaborate coupling between status and expectations than has previously been assumed.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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