

# Understanding SOCIAL STATUS

*It is one of the most powerful incentives of human behaviour, but how exactly does our social standing affect our everyday lives?*

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**L**eadng neuroscientist and professor of psychology Michael Gazzaniga once said, "When you get up in the morning, you do not think about triangles and squares. You think about status. You think about where you are in relation to your peers." It is something that drives nearly every decision that we make, from what we wear, to whom we associate with and the career path that we eventually take.

But when we talk about status, what exactly do we mean? Social status is often confused with social class, or what is otherwise known as 'sociometric status'. Whereas social class refers to an individual's position in society in relation to their economic background - such as their occupation and income - social status concerns the level of prestige, respect and influence that person is afforded by other people. Although someone may be low down the pecking order in regards to their sociometric status, in terms of their standing within their peer groups - such as their friendship circle or workplace - they might reign supreme.

Pursuing status, after all, is a universal human behaviour, whether we are conscious of it or not. Just like other animals, humans have evolved to care about status, because having a high ranking within a pack ensured our survival and access to resources such as food and potential mates. Although our social status may no longer be a matter of life and death, we still crave it. The ventral

striatum, deep within the brain, acts as a reward centre, and becomes especially activated at the beginning of adolescence whenever we receive social rewards such as attention or approval from others. We suddenly become keenly aware which of our peers are receiving the most praise and respect, and which ones are deemed more powerful and influential, and we start to seek this out for ourselves.

This type of behaviour isn't just confined to a playground setting. All societies have some form of social hierarchy as a way of allocating resources, leadership and power. Status is usually determined in two ways. Some societies value what is called 'ascribed status', the social position that is assigned to an individual at birth, based on factors such as their gender, race and family background. A baby born into a royal family will be given greater status compared to a baby born to a commoner, although the capabilities of either child at that point are unknown. However, the process of infant socialisation requires that each child be ascribed a ranking at birth.

In general, less-developed societies place greater emphasis on ascribed status, over which a person's ranking remains relatively fixed and rigid throughout their lifetime. Fortunately, there is also another form of

status known as 'achieved status', which is the position an individual earns through his own personal abilities and accomplishments. We tend to value achievement much more in Western societies, due to our cultural values of individualism, democracy and meritocracy. This is reflected in our love



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## HOW TO BECOME POPULAR

According to Professor Mitch Prinstein, there are two very different routes to obtaining social status. In his book, *The Popularity Illusion*, he explains that the first type reflects what most scientists would regard as 'status'. Prinstein defines status as "not a measure of how well liked a person is, but rather of his or her dominance, visibility, power and influence." The other type of popularity is what he describes as 'likeability', which are those people who are beloved by their peers because they make "others feel good, and included and valued."

The first type of popularity is something we so often see with playground bullies, who use aggressive tactics such as physical violence, spreading rumours and gossip or ostracising others to maintain their dominant position in the school's social hierarchy. Although they may appear to be 'popular' with others, researchers have found that only 35% of those who were ranked as high in status were also ranked as highly likeable by their peers.

Another problem with this type of popularity is that it is essentially fickle. As we so often see with celebrity culture, one day you are king of the castle, and unless you can maintain your position at the top, somebody else will come along, and you are suddenly old news. What we should be cultivating is 'likeability', a much more sustainable type of popularity, where our value as a person is dictated by intrinsic qualities such as kindness and generosity, rather than extrinsic factors such as our appearance, who we're dating or how much money we have.

for the classic 'rags-to-riches' archetype, which is represented so often in the media that we choose to consume and the public figures whom we place on pedestals.

It could be argued that Western societies have become increasingly more obsessed with social status in the course of the last few decades. Factors such as globalisation, the internet, the development of social media and the rise of celebrity culture have meant that more and more ordinary people have had access to opportunities that would have been inconceivable in the past. Now anyone can have their five minutes of fame, curate an image of perfection on social media, or advance their career prospects through higher education. And when we witness our fellow peers reaping the social rewards that come with attaining a higher status, we want our share too.

However, this shift in our cultural attitude towards pursuing prestige hasn't been without its repercussions. Political scientist Robert Putnam published the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000, and found that the social changes that had occurred in the previous 40 years had led to the public's conception of a 'good life' to morph from that of marriage, family life and community to that of wealth and status instead.

Although focusing on attaining status isn't necessarily a bad thing, valuing it too much over other areas of our lives can end up having a detrimental impact on our mental health. Professor Mitch Prinstein has conducted research on popularity and peer relations for two decades with his Peer Relations Lab, at both Yale University and the University of North Carolina. In his book, *The Popularity Illusion: Why Status is Toxic But Likeability Wins All*, he claims that the 'relentless pursuit of status puts us at risk for a wide range of serious life problems, including addiction, loneliness, and depression. The efforts required to obtain status - behaviours such as aggressiveness, disregarding the feelings of others and selfishness - should not be what we esteem for ourselves or for our society.'

Low-status individuals can also suffer the negative effects of our preoccupation with status. 'Status differences can be demoralizing' says Professor Cameron Anderson. 'Whenever you don't feel valued by others it hurts, and the lack of status hurts more people than we think.' At the University of California Berkeley's Haas School of Business, Anderson conducted an extensive study into whether status was a fundamental human motive. After Anderson and his team pored over hundreds of studies, they discovered

that status did in fact play an essential part in one's psychological wellbeing.

The findings from these studies reflect the different outcomes for those who fall poles apart on the social spectrum. They showed that those who had low status within their communities were more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and even cardiovascular disease. Other similar studies have found that those who were not so popular during their school years were at greater risk of a myriad of problems in later life, including substance abuse, obesity, illness and even suicide.

This is not to say, though, that procuring status is something that we should avoid altogether. Having a status system in place incentivises people to accomplish great feats in their desire to move up the social ladder and to reap the rewards that inevitably come with that. The success from those individuals' efforts then helps to advance us as both a civilisation and a culture. That in itself is surely something worth pursuing. ■

“PURSUING STATUS IS A UNIVERSAL HUMAN BEHAVIOUR”

