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Self-Esteem and Social Status: Dominance Theory and Hierometer Theory?



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Synonyms

[Narcissism](#); [Prestige](#); [Self-regard](#); [Social rank](#)

Definitions

Self-esteem denotes the positivity of one's overall self-evaluation. Status denotes the social prestige one gains in virtue of being respected and admired. Dominance theory and hierometer theory, drawing on evolutionary theory, specify how self-esteem and status might interrelate.

Introduction

Human beings, as self-conscious animals, evaluate themselves positively or negatively. In addition, as social animals, they also evaluate one another positively or negatively. The former type of evaluation, when positive, is commonly known

as *self-esteem* (Rosenberg 1965). The latter type of evaluation, when positive, might be labeled “social esteem.” One important question is how the two are linked.

Everyday intuition suggests, and classic theories propose, that self-esteem derives from social esteem (Cooley 1902). However, people do not absorb social information passively, but actively process it in a manner that protects their self-esteem (Sedikides and Gregg 2008). In addition, whereas self-esteem is inherently unitary – the self as a whole being a singularity – social esteem is inherently complex. Three fundamental dimensions stand out. First, people may be accorded respect and admiration, in virtue of being competent or powerful (*social status*; Fiske 2010). Second, people may be liked and appreciated, in virtue of being cooperative and caring (*social inclusion*; DeWall et al. 2011). Third, people may be fancied and pursued, in virtue of being fertile or rich (*reproductive fitness*; Shackelford et al. 2005).

Several theories address the link between social esteem and self-esteem and the evolutionary function that this link might serve. However, the theories differ in focusing on one or another of these three fundamental dimensions of value. For example, *sociometer theory* (Leary et al. 1995) in its original form focuses on social inclusion, but later extensions of the theory to romantic relationships focus on reproductive fitness (Bale and Archer 2013). Here, we discuss two theories that focus on social status as a fundamental dimension

of value: *dominance theory* and *hierometer theory*. Both theories claim to identify aspects of mind and behavior that have arisen in response to recurrent adaptive challenges present in the human ancestral environment.

Dominance Theory

Dominance theory (Barkow 1980) seeks to explain the striving for self-esteem in human beings as an elaboration of the more primitive strivings for social ascendancy in nonhuman animals. Most animal societies are hierarchically organized (Pusey and Packer 1997); that is, conspecifics spontaneously rank order themselves in ways that determine their priority of access to resources and mates. Doing so permits members of those societies, whatever their rank, to avail of the adaptive advantages of reduced aggression (Kaufmann 1983). Human societies are likewise stratified (Fiske 2010). However, given the greater cognitive sophistication of human beings (Gregg and Sedikides 2018), the mental mechanisms underlying their social stratification, although still shaped by evolutionary forces, are also liable to contain novel elements.

Dominance theory starts with the observation that rank order in animals can be largely characterized in terms of behavioral *dominance* or *submission*. Whether through differences in ability, motivation, or personality (Hurd 2006), some animals succeed in asserting themselves over others, often through ritualized signaling instead of overt aggression. Accordingly, each animal's rank order comes to reflect their level of comparative success in asserting themselves over time. Moreover, given the overall adaptive advantages of occupying a higher rank, it is plausible that some dedicated drive evolved to motivate animals toward seizing opportunities, when available, to attain this rank. Human beings should be no exception to this rule – and indeed, there is ample evidence of a universal desire for social status among them (Anderson et al. 2015). However, given that human beings are also self-conscious organisms, who contemplate themselves as well as their environment, dominance theory postulates that the

impulse to physically prevail over other animals has been largely transformed into an impulse to *symbolically evaluate oneself as better than other people* – which dominance theory characterizes as self-esteem. However, it should be noted that this definition of self-esteem – perceived relative superiority – differs from standard definitions of self-esteem, which involving seeing oneself as individually possessing adequate worth (Rosenberg 1965).

Dominance theory also specifies likely antecedents of self-esteem. Given that human beings are cultural animals (Baumeister 2005), their capacity to please real or imagined others (including, in aboriginal societies, ancestors and gods), by meeting expectations that are normative in their societies, is likely to be one key antecedent. Doing so can be understood as a means of gaining *prestige* in the eyes of others, as opposed to attempting to achieve dominance over them using raw power (De Waal-Andrews et al. 2015). Thus, whereas for most nonhuman animals (with possible exceptions among higher primates such as chimpanzees or bonobos), their rank in the social hierarchy is *only* the result of power-mediated dominance; in humans it can *also* be the result of consensus-mediated prestige. For this reason, indeed, dominance theory might be better labeled “prestige theory.” The drive for dominance is what human self-esteem evolved out of, not what currently underlies it.

Hierometer Theory

Like dominance theory, hierometer theory (Mahadevan et al. 2016) also postulates that self-esteem rises and falls in tandem with higher or lower social status. However, it differs from dominance theory in the account it gives of the adaptive function of self-esteem and of the motivational goals being pursued. In general, whereas dominance theory invokes an absolute drive toward social status, hierometer theory invokes a contingent one.

Hierometer theory starts from the premise that, although higher social status may be generally more conducive to survival and reproduction

than lower social status, it is nonetheless *not* generally adaptive for people to strive perpetually for higher social status, by invariably and inflexibly seizing opportunities to contest their place in the hierarchy. The simple reason is that such contests can be lost as well as won; and with one's survival potentially at stake, the avoidance of catastrophic defeats is no less imperative as the securing of profitable victories. Accordingly, the decision as to whether or not to enter such a contest, if it is to be optimally adaptive, must depend on people's actual competitive prospects, as best they can be determined. The situation is analogous to that arising in poker: all else equal, it makes more sense to raise when in possession of a relatively good hand and to fold when in possession of a relatively poor one. Hierometer theory postulates that the quality of one's poker hand corresponds to one's *existing* social status. Specifically, when one's social status is high, it makes more sense to escalate an incipient conflict assertively, whereas, when it is low, it makes more sense to de-escalate it acquiescently. This is because being already respected and admired (in a prestige hierarchy; or alternatively, being feared and obeyed in a dominance hierarchy) is a reliable sign that one has at one's disposal sufficient material and social resources to compete successfully. Accordingly, behavioral assertiveness should covary with social status. How does self-esteem fit into this picture? Hierometer theory postulates that self-esteem evolved at least in part as a psychological variable to mediate between the two – by reflecting social status on the one hand, and by regulating behavioral assertiveness on the other.

Note that, unlike dominance theory, hierometer does not specify the achievement of higher self-esteem per se as the motivational goal (although it does not deny the possibility). Rather, hierometer theory postulates that self-esteem *moderates* levels of motivation to escalate conflict so as to optimize people's chances of navigating social hierarchies. Another way of putting this point is to say that, whereas dominance theory characterizes the achievement of self-esteem as a symbolic proxy for the achievement of behavioral dominance, hierometer theory characterizes the achievement of self-esteem as the result of having previously attained higher social status, which in

turn facilitates the expression of assertive or "dominant" behaviors. A further implication is that, whereas dominance theory implies a *compensatory* dynamic – people will strive for self-esteem or prestige if they perceive one or the other to be too low (sociometer theory makes similar claims in respect of social inclusion; Leary et al. 1995), hierometer theory implies a *consolidatory* dynamic – people will strive for social status (via assertive behavior) to the extent that they already possess it.

Hierometer also goes further in postulating a role, not only for self-esteem but also for a variant form of self-regard, namely, *narcissism*, conceived of as normally distributed trait as opposed to a discrete clinical condition (Foster and Campbell 2007). Narcissism is characterized by grandiose self-views and exhibitionistic displays, an interest in exercising power and authority, and a tendency to feel entitled and to exploit others (Ackerman et al. 2011). As such, it is nonetheless potentially suited to mediating the impact of social status on competitive behavior.

Empirical Evidence for the Link Between Social Status and Self-Esteem

Despite the differences between dominance theory and hierometer theory, they make an identical prediction with respect to the link between social status and self-esteem (or narcissism): levels of the former should covary with levels of the latter. Moreover, this prediction should be borne out whether both variables are measured as traits or states as well as when confounding factors are taken into account.

Across diverse literatures and samples, the predicted positive correlation between social status and self-esteem emerges. For example, Faunce (1984) found that the social status of high-school students in their class, as reflected in peer rankings, especially when given by best friends, strongly predicted their self-esteem. Similarly, Smith et al. (1998, Study 3) found that, among university students, the belief that they were accorded respect by most members of their university community strongly predicted their self-esteem.

Nevertheless, given that social status covaries with other antecedents of self-esteem – in particular with social inclusion – such zero-order positive correlations are open to alternative interpretation. However, several studies have also confirmed that social status predicts self-esteem more specifically. For example, Fournier (2009) found that, among high-school students, peer ratings of respect, prominence, and influence predicted self-esteem even after controlling for peer ratings of likability and personal ratings of social support. In addition, Huo et al. (2010) found, in a similar populations, that social status (bundled with peer approval) predicted self-esteem (bundled with mental health) independently of social inclusion. Using cleaner operationalizations, Mahadevan et al. (2016) likewise found that social status predicted self-esteem independently of social inclusion. Furthermore, the link persisted even after controlling for the clinical confounds of depression and anxiety. Finally, only higher social status, but not higher social inclusion, independently predicted higher narcissism, thereby highlighting the value of operationalizing self-regard in more than one way and pointing to a unique functional role for social status and narcissism.

Although dominance theory and hierometer theory imply that social status – again, defined as the respect and admiration afforded by others (Anderson et al. 2015) – should predict self-esteem, they also imply that the objective foundations of social status, in particular, factors such as income, education, and occupation, often termed *socioeconomic status (SES)*, should also predict self-esteem. A meta-analysis by Twenge and Campbell (2002) indeed established that SES exhibits a small positive correlation on self-esteem. More recently, Kraus and Park (2014) reported that family income and personal education weakly predicted self-esteem but also that the effect was wholly mediated by subjective perceptions of one's social standing.

The best evidence for the impact of social status on self-esteem is experimental.

Wojciszke and Struzynska-Kujalowicz (2007, Study 2) showed that participants, assigned the group task of deciding which of several candidates should be hired for a job, ended up with

higher state self-esteem after being randomly assigned to the role of a supervisor as opposed to a subordinate. Similarly, Leary et al. (2001, Studies 1 and 2) orthogonally manipulated social status and social inclusion by providing lab participants with false feedback about how many of their groupmates had nominated them as a group leader or as group member, respectively. Both manipulations exerted roughly equal effects on state self-esteem, in the expected directions. Finally, Mahadevan et al. (2018) conducted two experiments in which college students were led to anticipate, on the basis of credible but bogus tests of intellectual and emotional competence, that their future social status and social inclusion would be markedly either high or low relative to most of their peers. Care was taken to otherwise match the format and content of feedback delivered. Again, both manipulations exerted roughly equivalent effects on self-esteem. However, raising perceptions of future social status lead to a greater increase in narcissism than raising perceptions of future social inclusion did. This again suggests that narcissism may be a more specific tracker of social status.

Hence, on the basis of converging evidence of varying methodological strength, social status and self-esteem, as well as narcissism, are linked in the manner predicted by both dominance and hierometer theory.

Conclusion

Within limits, how individuals are regarded by others affects how they regard themselves. Among other things, being respected and admired – enjoying social status – leads individuals to like themselves more, to have higher self-esteem, or even narcissism. Two theories, dominance theory and hierometer theory, both make this prediction, each offering an evolutionary rationale for it. However, they differ on the precise role they ascribe to self-esteem or narcissism, and how levels of status striving might be subsequently affected. Nonetheless, the initial prediction they make enjoys good empirical support. Most compellingly, experiments indicate that manipulations of social status exert a unique

impact on self-esteem and narcissism and find that the effects observed are comparable in size to those observed for manipulations of social inclusion (which concurrently support sociometer theory). Accordingly, there are solid grounds to propose that the function of self-esteem and narcissism might be, at least in part, to track levels of social status and possibly as a prelude to regulating subsequent status-seeking behavior.

Cross-References

- ▶ Sociometer Theory
- ▶ Self-esteem as a Status-Tracking Mechanism
- ▶ Dominance Theory (Cummins)
- ▶ Self-Esteem Reflects Assessments of Valuation
- ▶ Self-Esteem Tracks Mate Value
- ▶ Self-Evaluations Track Perceived Mate Value
- ▶ Self-Esteem Tracks Social Evaluation
- ▶ Self-Esteem Guides Decisions about Who to Challenge
- ▶ Changes in Self-Esteem Motivate Behavioral Changes
- ▶ Self-Esteem Increase Motivates Similar Behavior
- ▶ Self-Concept
- ▶ Self-Deception
- ▶ Self-Efficacy
- ▶ Self-Assessment
- ▶ Dominance versus Prestige
- ▶ Status and Dominance Hierarchies
- ▶ Dominance Hierarchies
- ▶ Dominance Hierarchy
- ▶ Dominance in Humans
- ▶ Male Dominance Hierarchies
- ▶ Female Dominance Hierarchies
- ▶ Social Dominance Orientation
- ▶ Dominance and Status in Nonhumans
- ▶ Primate Dominance Hierarchies
- ▶ Dominance Affords/Predicts Sexual Access
- ▶ Social Dominance and Sexual Access
- ▶ Dominance and Territory
- ▶ Indicators and Correlates of Status and Dominance
- ▶ Shifting Dominance
- ▶ Emergence of Dominance Hierarchy
- ▶ Function of Dominance

- ▶ Dominance Hierarchy Reduces Fighting
- ▶ Biosociology of Dominance and Deference

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