

We all want high social status: study

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Not everyone may care about having an impressive job title or a big, fancy house but all human beings desire a high level of social status, according to a newly published study.

For decades, researchers have argued both sides of the question: is it [human nature](#) to want high standing in one's social circle, profession, or society in general?

Prof. Cameron Anderson sought to settle the debate. In "Is the desire for [status](#) a fundamental human motive? A review of the empirical literature" (*Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 141(3), May 2015), Anderson and Berkeley-Haas Ph.D. candidates John Angus D. Hildreth and Laura Howland conducted an extensive review of hundreds of studies using a common set of criteria. They found that, yes, status is something that all people crave and covet - even if they don't realize it.

"I usually study the sexy angle of power and confidence but with this one, it's about everyone. Everyone cares about status whether they're aware of it or not," says Anderson.

Anderson is a professor of management and the Lorraine Tyson Mitchell Chair in Leadership & Communications II at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business. He says status is considered universally important because it influences how people think and behave.

"Establishing that desire for status is a fundamental human motive matters because status differences can be demoralizing," says Anderson.

"Whenever you don't feel valued by others it hurts, and the lack of status hurts more people than we think."

Some theorists have argued that wanting status is an innate desire for reputation or prestige. On the other end of the spectrum, scholars cast doubt on the notion that status plays an important role in one's psychological well-being or self-esteem. Anderson and his team researched a wide range of studies dating back more than 70 years. First, they defined and conceptualized status to "distinguish it from related constructs such as power and financial success." They defined status as comprising three components: respect or admiration; voluntary deference by others; and social value. Social value (also known as prestige) is bestowed upon individuals whose advice is sought by others. Prestige can also be measured by how much others defer to an individual.

Next, the researchers studied the previous literature that defines what it takes for a motive to be fundamental and innate to people. Four areas of criteria determined whether the desire for status is fundamental.

1. **Well-Being and Health** - the attainment of status must contribute to long-term psychological and physical health.

2. **Activities** - if the desire for status is fundamental, it must drive goal-oriented behavior aimed at attaining and maintaining status, drive a preference for select social environments, and drive people to react strongly when others perceive them as lacking status.

3. **Status for Status' Sake** - the desire for status is only that; the motivation for status is not dependent on other motives

4. **Universality** - the desire for status must operate and extend over many types of cultures, genders, ages, and personalities.

The strongest test of the hypothesis is whether the possession of low status negatively impacts health. The studies reviewed showed that people who had low status in their communities, peer groups, or in their workplaces suffer more from depression, chronic anxiety, and even cardiovascular disease. Individuals who fall lower on the status hierarchy, or what the authors call the "community ladder," feel less respected and valued and more ignored by others.

Anderson hopes the study's results influence future research including but not limited to management literature. "The desire for status can drive all kinds of actions, ranging from aggression and violence, to altruism and generosity, to conservation behavior that benefits the environment. The more we understand this basic driver, the more we can harness it to guide people's decisions and actions to more productive paths."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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