What is Social Status? Comparisons and Contrasts with Cognate Concepts*

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1. Introduction

Although there has been a recent surge of new work on social status—particularly research broadly consistent with the relational views of Merton (1968) and Podolny (1993; 2005)—questions about what status is persist. Some questions focus on how status primarily functions in markets: for example, is status a signal of unobserved quality or is it instead a good to be bought and displayed? Others concern the nature of its relational underpinnings: for instance, does status rest on the (passive) accrual of deference from esteemed others or rather on the (active) dominance of those favorably ranked in a pecking order? And, more generally, how does status differ from cognate concepts, such as quality, reputation, power, and legitimacy? As a starting point for addressing such questions—an endeavor we are persuaded is essential for greater conceptual clarity and new theoretical progress—we work from a flexible, provisional definition of status as a zero-sum relational asset that is possessed by social actors insofar as they are highly regarded by highly-regarded others.

Using this definition as a backcloth, in what follows we begin by developing a fourfold typology of conceptions of status in which we consider the implications both of understanding the asset as a quality-signal or as a conspicuous good and of viewing status-conferring ties to highly-regarded others as deference- or dominance-based. Our aim as we draw these distinctions is to bring into focus how different ways of viewing status necessarily entail disparate portrayals of the mechanisms by which status affects performance-related outcomes in market settings. We then discuss how status differs from the previously mentioned cognate concepts. Our aim in this connection is deliberately restricted: while we do offer semi-formal definitions of quality, reputation, power, and legitimacy, our current interest in these alternative constructs extends only as far as they bring relief to what we contend are the salient features of status. Finally, before concluding with potential avenues for future research that arise from our discussion, we offer cautionary measurement-related remarks in light of the definition we propose, discussing the virtues (and potential pitfalls) of implementing Bonacich’s (1987) status measure—one of the most recurrently used models in recent relationally-oriented studies.
2. Toward a Typology of Conceptions of Status

*Signal versus good.*— Consider the following the simple specification of the likelihood of getting a promotion offer in a large multi-divisional firm:

\[ \mu_{i,k,t+1} \propto X_{it} + \gamma S_{it} \] (1)

where \( \mu_{i,k,t+1} \) is the probability that executive \( i \) receives an offer for promotion to the rank of corporate officer in division \( k \) in time period \( t \), \( X_{it} \) contains various individual and contextual factors affecting rates of mobility, and \( S_{it} \) denotes \( i \)'s time-changing status. Although we expect \( \gamma > 0 \), status can raise the chances of promotion through acting as a signal or as a good.

Imagine first that a researcher takes a perspective in which executives’ status operates largely as a signal of underlying quality as a leader and manager. Research on signaling begins with Spence (1974), who discussed a strong signal as a factor that is easier (less costly) for higher-quality individuals to secure, so that individuals possessing and sending the signal are, for the most part, of higher quality than those who lack it. For example, a college degree, even if its content is unrelated to the local skill requirements of a particular job, is a strong signal of future productivity in the workplace because it is easier for higher-quality prospective hires to obtain a degree than it is for lower-quality candidates. In an influential theoretical contribution using data on investment banks, Podolny (1993) elaborated a conception of status as an affiliation-based signal of market actors’ otherwise difficult-to-detect quality. Like other signals of quality, status in this view is less costly for higher-quality actors to attain. For such actors (investment banks in Podolny’s model, executives in our example), the costs of securing the recognition of other highly regarded actors are discernibly lower.

Using this theoretical logic in the context of the expression in (1), a researcher would expect the
most able executives in contention for an offer from $k$ to gain access more readily to beneficial social contexts (e.g., the company’s operating councils or strategic leadership meetings) in which status-conferring relationships emerge, and over time to display more easily the traits necessary for these relationships to prosper. Adopting the view that status operates as a signal thus involves the expectation that officers in $k$ take $i$’s status as a valid indicator of $i$’s otherwise hard-to-assess capabilities.

Conversely, imagine now that a researcher takes a perspective in which executives’ status operates as a good to be consumed by their more senior counterparts in division $k$. This theoretical stance will yield a different account of the effect of status on the hazard of an offer. Unlike research on status signals, work on status as a good is older and less original, but is nonetheless interesting and important to consider because of its relevance to our understanding of how status can shape outcomes.

One of the main contentions of earlier research in this vein is simply that human beings (and other primates) acutely desire status as well as the related opportunity to affiliate with high-status others, and that these desires discernibly affect behavior. For instance, Park and Burgess (1921:30) colorfully argued that although “men work for wages… they will die to preserve their status.” Veblen (1934) maintained that individuals’ levels of satisfaction result largely from the respect they receive from their peers. Merton (1968: 56) underscored the disproportionate pull of the “coin of [peer] recognition” in the sciences. And in the terrain of rhesus macaques, Deaner, Khera, and Platt (2005) found evidence to suggest that individuals’ desire for status may (at least ephemerally) trump survival instincts: in their study, thirsty monkeys were willing to forego juice in order to peer at images of their high-status counterparts.

To see the distinctiveness of the status-as-good perspective in the context of equation (1), consider two executives—$A$ and $B$—both of whom are at risk of promotion to corporate officer and known to possess a comparable level of quality (that is, they are equivalently skilled as leaders and managers) captured by a variable (or set of variables) in $X_{ht}$. But members of $k$’s promotion committee—perhaps due to status-anxiety (De Botton 2004)—selects $A$ with greater probability because
of their strong taste for $A$’s affiliates. Unlike $B$, $A$ is a member of a family that is unusually prominent in national political circles. Additionally, $A$ has worked previously in a division of the firm that is a clear favorite of the firm’s CEO because of his unique career path. $B$ is again known to be equally competent, but having no halo, $B$ is socially naked by comparison.

Signaling is of course still at work in this scenario, but it is $k$’s promotion committee’s wish to signal to others (by “buying” and diffusing $A$’s status) that largely drives the outcome. No longer is the framing “let’s make her an officer—sponsors like these confirm she’s top-drawer.” In this second case, the (perhaps salacious) thought is, “we can’t pass on him—his friends and pedigree will be so good for us.”\(^1\) The status-as-signal and status-as-good perspectives thus offer quite different explanations of observed status effects. Whereas a signaling perspective portrays status as a means for dealing with incomplete information concerning a focal candidate’s quality, a consumption-based perspective focuses on status as an end (buyers of the candidate’s status experience internal satisfaction) and as a broader signal (buyers trade externally on the candidate’s status).\(^2\)

**Defence versus dominance**—. To illustrate a second conceptual distinction, consider next a simple model of post-offer performance as a corporate officer in the same multi-divisional firm:

\[
p_{d,t+1} \propto Z \beta + \theta S_a
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1. We add that these taste-based status effects are in not limited to relations between individuals; they certainly extend to (or, more accurately, “through”) physical objects. As Thye (2000:407) observed: “A rather mundane set of golf clubs once owned by former President John F. Kennedy recently sold for many thousands of dollars at a closed auction… [suggesting] that a person’s social status can affect the perceived value of objects to which they are related.”

2. Although our main interest is in distinguishing between causal accounts attached to signaling versus consumptive views of status, it is also interesting to consider ways of empirically adjudicating among alternatives. One approach is to examine simple correlations between pre-offer status and post-offer performance. Clearly, if this correlation is repeatedly weak over time, this is suggestive of the possibility that status is functioning as a good rather than as an indicator. Another possibility is to examine where new hires get placed in the formal or informal network. For example, if new hires are situated close to those who speak for the company (see Zuckerman [2010]), this is an important consideration along with the broader issue of their (possibly strategic) level of visibility to important audiences.
where $p_{ikt}^{t+1}$ denotes officer $i$’s future performance (financial or otherwise) in division $k$, $Z_{ikt}$ contains various factors affecting performance, and $S_{it}$ again denotes $i$’s status. $S_{it}$ is expected to affect performance positively, but in this case can have different network-related underpinnings—deference or dominance—which then carry implications for the magnitude and variance of $\theta$.

Consider first the possibility that a researcher views $i$’s status as a function of the extent to which $i$ receives deference (recognition and respect) from highly-regarded others. Taking this perspective is consistent with a large body of well-known work in organization theory and sociology. A few of the many empirical examples of this approach are the Supreme Court Justice receiving respect from appellants (Shils 1965), the scientist receiving esteem from colleagues (Merton 1968), the patent holder receiving citations from other technologists (Podolny and Stuart 1995), and the academic department receiving recognition from other departments who hire the former’s doctoral students (Burris 2004).

Consistent with such cases, Podolny and Phillips (1996) drew an important analytical distinction between deference as a dyadic “flow” between individuals intertwined in a social system and status as the resultant “stock” or aggregation of such flows accruing to a focal individual.

Viewing status as deference-based thus requires attention to a specific kinds of relational data for the measurement of $S_{it}$. For instance, the extent to which a focal executive is the object of deference could be inferred from data on advice seeking, communication patterns in electronic exchanges, the dispensation of opportunities to “pitch” before senior executives, or qualitative evaluations surfacing in yearly performance reviews. All such dyadic flows are instances of “pellets of peer recognition” that coalesce to determine an individual’s location in a latent status order (Merton 1988: 620).

Using a deference-based lens also involves clear theoretical intuitions on the kinds of mechanisms that might account for a positive effect of status on future performance. For instance, drawing further on Merton’s (1968, 1988) foundational insights, one might plausibly expect newly minted
officers who enter their new role with higher status to immediately begin benefiting from the “Matthew Effect.” When Merton first used the concept in the sociology of science, he applied it at two levels—micro and macro: at the micro or social-psychological level, he meant it to describe the process by which high-status scientists get discernibly more credit for comparable intellectual achievements than their less well-regarded colleagues; and at the macro or structural level, he used it to describe the process, often referred to as cumulative advantage, by which high-status scientists enjoy positive feedback between intangible and tangible resources, and thus eventually gather up a disproportionate share of the rewards.

Accordingly, if one assumes that the executives-turned-officers in our example can “carry” their status into their new role (an assumption we later examine critically), two expectations are then straightforward: first, higher-status officers will get relatively more credit for the team-based work they undertake (more than the “fair” share they would garner from the intrinsic worth of their contributions alone); second, they will more easily gain resources (physical, financial, human, and social) conducive to pulling ahead of lower-status officers. Thus, officers’ job performance will rise as a function of the extent to which they have previously received deference from colleagues.

In contrast, a dominance-based conception of status draws on different (and perhaps less-well-known) theoretical antecedents, calls for different kinds of relational data, and, in our view, it yields more nuanced intuitions about causal mechanisms. Our distinction between what might be termed “soft” status (based on deference) and “hard” status (premised on dominance—the flip side of deference) is broadly consistent with Ridgeway and Walker’s (1995:285-6) distinction between exchange-theoretic and conflict-dominance conceptions of status and with de Waal’s (1989:187) intriguing study of chimpanzees. As noted in the latter study, “The female hierarchy in our chimpanzee group [seemed] to be based on respect from below rather than intimidation and a show of strength from above [as among male chimps].”

In addition, a dominance-centered view of status accords with a variety of classical sociological investigations that have pictured status as the residue of competition. For instance, Park and Burgess (1921:574) envisioned “the status of the individual … in the social order … [as] determined by rivalry, by
war, or by subtler forms of conflict.” Veblen ([1899] 1994: 47) described elites maintaining their status on the backs of social rivals through strategic gift-giving and conspicuous consumption. Blau (1964: 127) argued that “differentiation of social status . . . emerges in the course of competition [as] each group member competes with all the other members for [their] respect.” In his celebrated study of the Nortons street gang, Whyte ([1943] 1981) understood status distinctions among gang members to be largely a function of prior successes and defeats in one-on-one street fighting. 3 According to Whyte, gang members’ positions in this dominance-based status hierarchy dictated (and were further reinforced by) their athletic performance: their bowling scores virtually matched their locations in the status ordering because they collectively deemed it inappropriate for low-status gang members to bowl well, but when one of the least prestigious members bowled by himself (that is, beyond the strictures of status-based norms), he recurrently beat the leader’s average score (Ridgeway and Walker 1995). 4

Accordingly, a researcher using a dominance-centered lens will harness kinds of relational data for the measurement of $S_u$ in (2) that differ from those just discussed in connection with deference. This is because a dominance-based view assumes that individuals actively “take,” more than they passively “receive,” the status they possess. And it is a perspective that is especially appropriate for overtly competitive settings where literal pecking orders emerge, such as elementary school playgrounds (Cohen 1971), street gangs (Bourgois 2003; Papachristos 2009), athletic tournaments (Bothner, Kang, and Stuart 2007), and conflict-laden meetings among executives (Morrill 1995). Correspondingly, the extent to

3 Doc, the Nortons’ leader, relayed the following account: “Nutsy was the head of our gang once. I was his lieutenant. He was bigger than me, and he had walloped me different times before I finally walloped him. When he walloped me, there weren’t many people around, so I didn’t mind, but the one time he broke his promise that he wouldn’t hit me, there was a big crowd around... I couldn’t let him get away with that ... I went after him, and I was beating him up when the big fellows stopped us..... Next day I saw him leaning up against the wall. I went up to him and said, ‘I’ll kill you,’ and I let him have one. He didn’t fight back. He knew I was his master. And that got around ... After I walloped him, I told the boys what to do” ([1943] 1981:4).

4 This outcome is consistent with Whyte’s larger theoretical discussion of status as a factor that elevates performance by imbuing elites with confidence and by generating norms that allow elites disproportionately to assault verbally their more marginal counterparts. And although pugilistic skill was clearly a factor affecting members’ location in a status order that in turn shaped scores at the alley, autocorrelated athletic ability (carrying over from boxing to bowling) is absent from Whyte’s account. It is instead squarely premised on social construction, not skill. Status-based expectations and norms for Whyte drove the outcome.
which a focal executive masters ascendant peers could be inferred from data on persistency and aversion of eye contact (Mazur 1985), conversational interruptions (Gibson 2005), and informal tournaments for physical (and human) resources (Collins 1987).

Furthermore, compared to a deference-centered view, a dominance-based lens also involves more varied theoretical intuitions on how status affects performance-related outcomes. Consider again the expectation that, consistent with the social-psychological version of the Matthew Effect, a corporate officer who enjoyed high status as an executive now gets disproportionate credit for collaborative work done in division $k$ and thus posts stronger overall performance. If this endowment of status has its provenance in acts of dominance undertaken before $i$ moves to $k$, this may result in a realization of the Matthew Effect that is either stronger or weaker than that for a comparable individual whose prior status is instead rooted in deference. On the one hand, an officer known for having publicly outstripped dominant peers may enjoy an even brighter halo and thus garner recognition for teamwork in greater increments. On the other hand, a large amount of dominance-based status may work against the focal officer because of envy-driven gossip: instead of enjoying a base of sponsors willing to perpetuate positive stories, he or she is at risk of negative gossip from those who (because of the focal officer’s prior actions) are sited further down in the pecking order.

Reconsider also the expectation that, in keeping with a structural version of the Matthew Effect, an officer who enjoyed high status as an executive now experiences cumulative advantage in the new role. Again, if this status is dominance-based, the extent to which the Matthew Effect unfolds may either exceed or fall beneath what a comparable individual with deference-based status would experience. On the one hand, an individual enjoying a high level of dominance-based status may enjoy even greater cumulative advantage on account of the confidence and charisma (Merton 1968: 60-1) that results from openly outstripping rivals. On the other hand, if it is more costly—in terms of energy, time, and other resources—to achieve dominance-based status, the focal officer then enters the new job at least partially
depleted (cf. Carroll and Hannan 2000: 289 on the depletion of firm-level endowments) and thus enjoys cumulative advantage to a much more limited degree.\(^5\)

**Types of Conceptions of Status.**— With this pair of binary distinctions just discussed, we can turn now to figure 1 where we briefly highlight four ways of conceptualizing status. On the vertical axis, which concerns how status functions in a focal market, we distinguish between signaling and consumption-related views. On the horizontal axis, which concerns relational foundations, we distinguish between deference- and dominance-based underpinnings.

![Figure 1 about here]

5 Although our aim in discussing these alternatives is to bring into focus differences between deference- and dominance-based status, it is also interesting to consider conditions under which dominance-based status is expected to prove significantly less valuable. First, when considering the countervailing effects of envy and negative gossip, a salient factor is the number structural holes (Burt 1992) between \(i\)'s previous and current network: with a sufficiently deep divide between old and new networks, it is more likely that only the positive signal of one’s coveted position in the pecking order gets transmitted while the negative residue is contained. Second, when considering the possibility of depletion in the wake of (expensively) acquiring dominance-based status, an important factor is the location and shape of the underlying ability distribution: strong competitors who are also near equals—and thus prone to elicit risky behavior (cf. Geertz [1973] on near-parity and risk-taking in cockfighting)—clearly make status-ascent more costly.
What we refer to as type-1 status appears in the south-west quadrant and is exemplified by the investment banks that are the empirical focus of Podolny’s (1993) model. High-status investment banks receive deference from other banks in the context of publicly monitored transactions and on this basis signal their quality to prospective exchange partners, such as employees, customers, and future collaborators. Moving north in figure 1, celebrity directors—the “attractive ornaments on the corporate Christmas tree” described by Mace (1971: 207)—are an example of holders of type-2 status. In a recent article on the subject, Westbrook and Katz (2009) called attention to rules under consideration by the SEC that would require U.S. corporations to justify paying celebrities (for instance, military leaders and actors) for their services as directors on their boards. Regulatory attention to the practice of seating celebrities on boards is important precisely because it highlights the fact that celebrities’ status (a function of the esteem they collect) has virtually nothing to do with their competence as overseers and almost everything to do with the publicity they can garner for the company (Pressler 2009).

Shifting to dominance-based conceptions, for the south-east quadrant we return to Whyte’s (1981) ethnography of the Nortons street gang for an example of type-3 status. Elite gang members in Whyte’s account secured their ascendant positions by openly outstripping their peers (in boxing and in bowling), and the resultant stocks of status held by the higher-ranking members of the gang sent strong cues to followers about the essential appropriateness of their roles as leaders. Turning finally to type-4 status in the north-east quadrant, we refer to NASCAR auto racers analyzed by Bothner, Kim, and Smith (2010) as examples of those possessing dominance-based status by virtue of out-ranking other highly-ranked drivers in weekly races occurring over the course of a season. In their account, NASCAR drivers experience status primarily as a self-satisfying good that shapes engagement levels in a context where drivers’ quality is well-known from multiple publicly tracked measures of athletic performance.

Using the different types depicted in figure 1, we now move from internal to external contrasts by
considering how status differs from quality, reputation, power, and legitimacy. In addition, for each cognate concept, we begin with a precise verbal definition, discuss how status (of the most relevant types) is distinct, and then delineate the main theoretical implications of the distinctiveness of status.

3. Cognate Concepts: Contrasts and Implications

Quality—. We define quality as the extent of individual’s (or organization’s) stock of knowledge and skill that in turn yields desirable outputs (Becker 1964; Spence 1974; White 1981). Thus, although recent research has construed quality and status as loosely linked and thus (at least partially) mutually constitutive—so that quality, among other factors, contributes to status, and status in turn affects the perceived component of quality (Podolny 2005; Lynn, Podolny, and Tao 2009)—our focus here, for sake of drawing the sharpest possible contrast, is instead on inherent quality, for instance, of the kind discernible through a “blind taste test” (Benjamin and Podolny 1999; Bothner, Podolny, and Smith 2010). Quality in this inherent, rather than socially constructed, sense offers a useful anchor for emphasizing a distinctive feature of status in our provisional definition—namely, that status is necessarily relational, whereas quality is not. Put differently, status is “stored” in social networks while quality can be housed in a lone person. Our view of the difference between quality and status is therefore closely analogous to Coleman’s (1990:304) discussion of the difference between human and social capital: “Physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form; human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual; social capital is even less tangible, for it is embodied in the relations among persons.” We emphasize three implications of relational nature of status versus the individualistic nature of quality.

First, it is theoretically possible for status differences both to arise exogenously among social actors of equal quality and then to induce differences in the time-changing component of their quality levels. Although it is not difficult to envision such a two-step process unfolding in a cohort of carefully vetted new hires—for whom “screening and sorting have run their course” (Leifer 1988:865) so that, at
least for the moment, little or no distinctions are apparent—we engage in a simple thought experiment that draws on ethologically oriented research (Chase 1980; Mazur 1985; Rajecki 1988; Schjelderup-Ebbe 1975) for sake of sharper illustration.

Think of a set of genetically identical chickens dropped simultaneously, and from randomly selected locations, into an outdoor cage. These are young clones, who were nurtured in equivalent but isolated environments, and thus have never intermingled previously. They are therefore exactly identical by all measures of physical and mental quality. Owing to exogenous factors—shifts in wind, sunlight, heat, or even precipitation—some chickens peck on nearby peers sooner and more forcibly than others do. These first-movers are also precocious performers of other aggressive acts, such as clawing, pulling feathers, and pouncing on neighbors (Chase 1980: 911). Over time, a discernible dominance-based status ordering emerges and then virtually crystallizes. Chickens learn how they should interact with their peers.

In addition, guided by this newly-formed hierarchy, clones eventually show evidence of differences in quality. Occupants of top positions in the order restrict access to feed, water, and desirable physical spaces in the cage, and these differences in access eventually produce noticeable variation in strength and health. Thus, despite quality-equivalence at time-of-entry, a status ordering built on dominance relations takes shape and induces a “fanning out” (cf. Dannefer 1987; Elder 1969) in subsequent quality by channeling and restricting access to coveted resources. This example is of course extreme—it is generally the case that quality differences have significant bearing on status differences—but is important because it calls attention to ways in which the relations that “embody” status can emerge independent of—and then force apart—levels of quality.

Second, the relational nature of status implies that status is less “mobile” than quality. Earlier

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6 We thank Damon Phillips for conversations on this topic.

7 Whether this is closer to type-3 (signaling) or type-4 (consumptive) status is clearly the province of the biologist.

8 We are grateful to Ron Burt for discussions around this issue.
we focused on executives’ rates of promotion, but now imagine two executives—C and D—considering a lateral move. C and D lead business units I and II respectively of a multi-divisional firm. Units I and II differ only in the geographic markets they serve, and C and D are comparable in inherent quality, in the esteem in which their direct reports hold them, and in their financial performance. But C moves from unit I to lead unit III, to occupy the same role as before, while D decides to stay in unit II. We expect C now to underperform D—and not only because C must suddenly learn a new geographic market. C also does worse because C cannot bring all of her most admiring direct reports with her. She has fallen in type-1 status, and consequently faces higher costs when recruiting talent and wielding influence. It is in this sense that status is relatively immobile and therefore advantageous in a restrictively local sense.

A related third implication is that status is generally more vulnerable to loss than quality. Although we defined status as an asset that is “possessed” by a focal actor, the preceding quotation marks could in principle permanently remain. Like other forms of social capital—and certainly moral capital (Valverde 1994)—status is an asset only partially held by the focal actor, never fully relinquished by those from which it proceeds. Burt’s (1992:9) discussion of social capital in general thus illuminates an important facet of status in particular: “it is a thing owned jointly by the parties to a relationship. No one player has exclusive ownership rights to [it]. If you or your partner in a relationship withdraws, the connection, with whatever social capital it contained, dissolves.” It is this risk of dissolution that we underscore by suggesting that one might circumspectly surround “possessed” with quotation marks. Social ties do channel status-conferring flows, but these ties or conduits can of course burst or run dry, leaving would-be recipients suddenly short of the inputs necessary for status retention (cf. Podolny 2001). Even the individual whose (type-3 or 4) status stands on having elicited subordinates’ acts of acquiescence and submission can see his or her status repossessed when subordinates cease to submit. Indeed, to the extent that such confiscation or impounding cannot occur (for instance, when “admirers” are kept against their will by a dictator to stage a rally), the focal individual enjoys a form of power, not status.
Reputation—. We define reputation, following Milgrom and Roberts’ (1992: 603) succinct summary, with the “view formed of an individual or organization by another based on past experience, especially as a basis for forecasting future behavior.” In addition, although an individual or organization can have a reputation for any number of traits—such as honesty (Smith 1964), treating employees fairly (Kreps 1996) or unfairly (Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler 1986), being a quick study (Prendergast and Stole 1996), predation (Milgrom and Roberts 1982), or even eco-friendliness (Scarpa, Thiene and Marangon 2007)—our emphasis here is primarily on reputation for quality, that is, for delivering desirable products or services. Type-1 status especially is thus very similar to reputation so defined, but the two concepts also differ significantly: Although deference-based status is often at least partly shaped empirically by a focal actor’s behaviors, unlike reputation deference-based status requires no history of observed behavior (cf. Podolny 2005; Jensen and Roy 2008). This is particularly true for status as it functions as good, but even for status as it operates as a signal.

To appreciate first how type-1 status can appear “on the spot”—that is, without a behavioral track record—consider the case of a young woman seeking capital for her nascent business from a community bank. She has no record of commercial success, nor any history of repaying commercial loans, and her business is at this juncture merely a concept. She does, however, enjoy a close tie to an aunt—one who is widely esteemed in local business circles—and this aunt endorses her niece as she seeks backing from the bank. While endorsing her, the aunt does not co-sign nor does she remind the banker of any outstanding favor. The aunt only expresses praise for her niece’s entrepreneurial potential. In the process, the aunt’s status spills over on—and creates a halo for—her niece. The bankers draw an inference about the niece’s future prospects from the aunt’s imprimatur, give her the loan, and so we can think of the niece’s type-1 status as reputation at one remove.

Such an inference is, however, unnecessary for status to affect the process of getting a loan—and this fact both takes us back to our discussion of type-2 status. Consider now the counterfactual case of a young man seeking capital for his fledgling business from the same community bank. Like the niece, he
has yet to establish a commercially relevant reputation. And while he too has a strong tie to an aunt, the aunt in this case is not an esteemed denizen of the local business community. She instead, we can imagine, enjoys international esteem as an actress and musician. The bankers are consumers of her cultural products and also deeply wish to associate with her status. Consequently, they grant the nephew the loan—but at the same time harbor quiet concern that it may ultimately go unpaid.

The bankers’ discomfiture points to an important implication of the difference between reputation and status—and one that goes directly to Milgrom and Roberts’ definition: *status is not nearly as reliable a forecasting device as reputation*. We see two main reasons why a reputation (for doing work of high quality) is a better predictor of favorable future outcomes. Very simply, the first is state dependence in human behavior: if an individual has acted in a certain way long enough for a reputation to emerge, then he or she is likely to persist in the same behavioral vein in the future. More subtly, a second reason is that a reputation is necessarily *earned*—unlike status, it cannot be freely inherited. The possessor of a reputation has necessarily invested discernible time and energy in its development, and so he is subsequently less likely to deviate from it. Conversely, because status (types 1 and 2) is relatively decoupled from behavior—having its most proximate antecedents instead in social relations—and because status is generally not nearly as “earned,” it is also not nearly as reliable a predictor of desirable future conduct.

This brings us to a related, second implication, which is that if status (of whatever type) is experienced by its possessor mainly as a good, status can in fact portend *lower* future quality. It is in this connection that status can both serve as a good for the individual who has it and as a distortion (rather than an informative signal) for unsuspecting audience members. Underlying this deleterious process is the complacency that, if unchecked by other incentives and constraints, can result from the acquisition of status.9

9 Bothner, Kim, and Smith (2010) discuss scope conditions on the expectation that status will yield negative performance-related outcomes. One of the most important conditions is the location of the focal status contest in a larger, meta-hierarchy of status contests (e.g., those competing in a low- or middle-status tournament for status are
This view of status as potentially corrosive is consistent with the imagery of several earlier lines of research. For example, in his discussion of status groups, Weber (1978:1000-1) warned of nonproductive rent-seeking behavior among high-status individuals. Pareto (1991) underscored the frequency with which high-status individuals (because of their status) become “soft” and ultimately forfeit their coveted positions. Park and Burgess (1921:711) warned that the principal “danger of status is that of suppressing personal development, and so of causing social enfeeblement, rigidity, and ultimate decay.” These admonitions are important theoretically because they highlight the potentially negative side effects of status. Negative, surprising outcomes are of course also possible in the wake of having crafted a coveted reputation (it too can breed complacency), but such outcomes are more likely to follow status because status is less subject to the strictures of behavioral inertia and of personal commitment.

Power—. We equate the power of a social actor (individual or organization) with the extent to which others are dependent on resources under that actor’s control (Emerson 1964; Scott 1992). Accordingly, although it is not uncommon for high-status individuals also to be thought of as powerful, we view status as sharply distinct from power because of their disparate relational underpinnings. Put simply, whereas power turns on ties to dependents, status hinges on ties to elites.10

Consider first the imagery shared by several relationally-oriented models that are broadly consistent with Emerson’s (1964) early supposition that “power derives from the other’s dependency.”
For example, Blau (1964:118) asserted that “providing needed benefits others cannot easily do without is undoubtedly the most prevalent way of attaining power.” Coleman (1973) conceived of an individual’s power as arising from others’ interest in the resources over which the former exerts control. Marsden and Laumann (1977:217) identified “the most powerful actors in [a] system” as “those persons at the center of the network, on whom the more peripheral actors are dependent.” And Bonacich (1987:1171) measured power as a function of “being connected to those who are powerless” by virtue of having few “potential trading partners.”

In contrast, numerous depictions of status have often focused not on dependency relations but rather on connections to elites—that is, to highly regarded others, to return to our provisional definition—as the relevant network-related building blocks. For instance, Pareto (1935) discussed high-status individuals as those who have successfully entered an “exalted community.” Weber ([1958] 1991:187-8) traced status to residency in exclusive communities and thus pointed to one’s literal neighbors as sources of status. Similarly, Hollander (1958:120) portrayed status as “an accumulation of positively-disposed impressions residing in the perception of relevant others.” Benoit-Smullyan (1944:157) noted that individuals “who associate with people of high prestige, participate in that prestige; even fleeting contact confers some prestige. (‘Shake hands with the man who shook hands with the President.’) ... Those who regularly associate with a person of high prestige status, come, in some mysterious fashion, to ‘participate’ in that prestige, at least to the extent of raising their own.” And at the organizational level, this stance is reflected in Perrow’s (1961:335) depiction of high-status organizations as those that have a “predominantly favorable image” in the context of their “salient publics.”

Moreover, although the preceding examples clearly relate to deference-based status, dominance-based conceptions also focus on ties to elites. For instance, according to Park (1952: 176), “every individual finds himself in a struggle for status: a struggle to preserve his personal prestige, his point of view, and his self-respect. He is able to maintain them, however, only to the extent that he can gain for himself the recognition of everyone else whose estimate seems important.” Thus, being highly regarded
by others who are highly regarded—whether an exalted community, upscale neighbors, relevant others, persons with high prestige, salient publics, or opinion leaders—is a defining feature of status. That is, status is not simply a matter of securing deference from (or enjoying dominance over) a large number of alters. The identities of these alters—whether their status is high or low—also matters significantly.

This recursive property of status brings us to the main implication of the difference between status and power we wish to emphasize—namely, that unlike power, status is highly contagious. That is, while it is conceivable that association with a powerful person may increase a focal individual’s power (for instance, he or she may, through affiliation, get valued resources or directly acquire new dependents), our discussion suggests that status is much more likely than power to diffuse through social relations. In other words, status is particularly prone to “traveling” through the ties that constitute a network.

Going back to our status versus reputation contrast, this means again that status can emerge rapidly. A often-discussed case of rapid status contagion (and thus status emergence for the “infected” individual) is the account of Baron de Rothschild’s response to a friend who requested a loan: “Reputedly, the great man replied, ‘I won’t give you a loan myself; but I will walk arm-in-arm with you across the floor of the Stock Exchange, and you soon shall have willing lenders to spare’” (Caldini 1989).

But more subtly the fact that status is subject to person-to-person contagion also means that status can be lost as it diffuses. Using a formal model, Bothner et al. (2010) focused on inter-temporal status diffusion between an elite leader and his or her self-chosen heir. They found that the diffusion of status through deference-based affiliations can be so pronounced that elites eventually end up forfeiting their social footing to those they have endorsed—because they have endorsed them. As an example of this process, they discussed the struggle for control between Steve Jobs and John Sculley early on at Apple Computer (Carlton 1997). Jobs, with charisma to spare but in search for a corporate mentor, had successfully persuaded Sculley to leave a promising track at Pepsi and join him at Apple to “change the world.” Jobs’ extraordinary status rapidly magnified Sculley in the Apple fold. Yet, after endorsing Sculley, Jobs eventually found himself overtaken in formal authority by the former, as Sculley convinced
Apple’s board of directors in a moment of crisis to strip Jobs of his position. The possibility for such reversals may also explain why dictators often populate their inner circle with those who cannot surpass them in status, such as eunuchs (Coser 1964) or women bodyguards (Dowdney 1998), or regularly sentence those closest to them to exile or death (Evans 1995). More generally, status is sufficiently contagious that person-to-person diffusion can at times eventuate in endogenous status turnover—or, at the least, an acute awareness that unwanted mobility may occur as elites fear paradoxically destroying their cumulative advantage beneath the weight of their endorsements of others.\footnote{This process differs from Podolny’s (2005) discussion of status leakage in that, in our example, status more literally leaks—not only diffusing, but moving in a zero-sum manner so that the elite loses out in status to the person he or she anoints.}

**Legitimacy**—. We define legitimacy very simply as a state of being taken for granted. That is, legitimate individuals or organizations are seen by others as natural and appropriate and are therefore unlikely to suffer questioning (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Scott 1995; Deephouse 1996; Ruef and Scott 1998). Although legitimacy and status similarly hinge on the views of a broader audience—in particular, both frequently require others’ endorsements, whether officially recognized “cultural or political authorities” emphasized by institutional theorists (Scott 1995) or elite peers stressed by network-analytic researchers—legitimacy and status differ in the degree to which they are zero-sum. More precisely, in any social system, an increase in one actor’s status inevitably means that at least one other actor must undergo a corresponding decline, but by contrast a social system can, in principle, evolve to the point at which each of its incumbents are legitimate.

Consider (necessarily extreme) examples of this possibility. Social settings in which all achieve legitimacy may be sociological and political bête-noirs, but the important claim for bringing forward the distinctiveness of status is that such contexts are nonetheless imaginable. For example, in Plato’s *Republic*, all members fall into one the three classes—rulers, warriors, and producers—so that everyone “naturally” fills a role based on skills determined at birth. Moreover, Plato’s utopia—where all are
legitimate—is for Popper ([1945] 1971) dystopian, who saw in Plato the intellectual “root” of modern totalitarian states, the antithesis of fluid democratic societies. Correspondingly, science fiction often construes dystopian societies in which all institutions, however morally reprehensible they may be by current norms, go unquestioned. For instance, in Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*, the over-sized pulsating brain, “IT,” on planet Camazotz ensures legitimacy for everyone before its dismantling at the hands of the story’s protagonists. Thus, it is (logically if not empirically) possible for all actors in a system enter a state of legitimacy.

Unlike legitimacy, status levels are strongly zero-sum: a gain in one individual’s status necessarily entails loss for someone else, so that it is impossible for actors in a system to enjoy status. We thus agree with a central facet of Benoit-Smullyan’s (1944:151; emphasis added) understanding of status as “an inferiority-superiority scale with respect to the comparative degree to which [actors] possess or embody some socially approved or generally desired attribute or characteristic.” Our perspective is also in keeping with Milner’s (1994:34) contention that “the amount of status available to a group is relatively inexpansible [and that] status is basically a matter of relative ranking.” There is an important caveat here, however: just because one individual has advanced in status—that is, she has widened her slice of an “inexpansible” pie—does not mean that all others are left with less to split among themselves. This brings us full circle to a point made earlier—that status is contagious. Given that status spills over through social ties, an elite’s further progress away from the pack may again result in the elevation of that individual (or set of individuals) to whom the elite is most closely affiliated.

Elites’ opportunities to pull ahead of lower-ranked peers at the latter’s expense—while at the same time suctioning up their closest affiliates—takes us to an implication of the difference between status and legitimacy we wish to underscore. This is the observation that status is more likely than legitimacy to invite intervention. This observation is not a tautology resulting from the fact that legitimacy implies freedom from critical evaluation. It instead reflects the fact that status positions
(particularly the most coveted ones) are often thought to have been secured unfairly and thus evoke feelings of relative deprivation (Walker and Smith 2001; Burt 2009).

The clearest articulation of this idea appears in Merton’s (1968: 59) discussion of the “double injustice” of the Matthew Effect, according to which low-status individuals are “unjustifiably victimized” while their elite counterparts are “unjustifiably benefited.” Accordingly, as Merton (1988) considered factors that prevent status-based advantages from growing without bound, he emphasized the redistributive inclinations of governments, noting that egalitarian norms may result in the reallocation of surplus in such a way that no one laboratory or university can pull too far ahead of the pack (Merton 1988: 619). Other researchers have pointed to less formal mechanisms of intervention and to the competitive actions of individuals whose status falls shy of that of their more well-regarded peers (Burt 1987; Bothner, Kang, and Stuart 2007). Whether interventions geared towards attenuating status distinctions—and even forcing turnover at the top—emerge from widely shared social norms or from localized feelings of deprivation, the strongly zero-sum nature of status hierarchies—coupled with the perception that positions within them have been “unearned”—means that they are particularly susceptible to projects to induce social change.

4. Measuring Status: Advantages and Cautionary Notes

The methodologically inclined reader will have already discerned in the structure of our definition of status a preference for Bonacich’s (1987) measure. Readers well-versed in the many sociological literatures on status have also recognized our lack of attention to characteristic-based or categorical (rather than relational) views of status, which array actors in a status ordering according to traits, such as race, gender, occupation, or beauty (Berger, Cohen and Zelditch 1972; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway and Johnson 1990; Ridgeway, Johnson and Diekema 1994). While we certainly regard such approaches as valuable for understanding status, they are beyond the scope of the present paper. In addition, a characteristic-based or categorical conception of status at least implicitly requires a relational view because characteristics are only status-congenial (or status-eroding) in and through social ties. Even if beauty is the basis for individuals’ status, this is only because those poised to determine who is beautiful and who is homely have in some sense certified the beautiful.
Steering clear of Whitehead’s([1925] 1997) “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”—guilt of which would involve naively suggesting that the measure somehow perfectly is status—we briefly discuss advantages of Bonacich’s (1987) measure, before highlighting three main themes that we believe are especially important for status researchers to address when considering using it empirically.

Used widely in empirical research, and increasingly in formal models (Ballester, Calvó-Armengol and Zenou 2006; Hannan, Pólos and Carroll 2003), Bonacich’s (1987) measure has the attractive features of making status explicitly zero-sum and also folding into the computation of each actor’s status score an added boost insofar as a focal actor is the object of status-conferring flows others who are themselves objects of such flows. To see these advantages, consider the simple hypothetical relational matrix in table 1.

Table 1. An example of a relational matrix used to compute status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>i</th>
<th>j</th>
<th>k</th>
<th>q</th>
<th>Row Sums</th>
<th>Status Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This illustrative matrix summarizes relations among four individuals—i, j, k, and q. If we assume that these individuals possess different levels of deference-based status, then the matrix distinguishes between receivers of deference in the rows, and givers of deference in the columns, so that each cell in the matrix tallies what might be thought of as “payments” of recognition and respect from one individual to another. We might imagine further that these payments or flows run from a minimum of zero (no recognition) to a maximum of five (profound respect). Going across the first row in table 1 for i, we then see that j holds i in the highest possible esteem—more so than k does or even q.

Therefore, for any chosen row in this matrix, entries capture the extent to which individuals in the columns recognize or defer to the individual in that row. That is, the row vectors comprising the matrix in table 1 proxy the inter-personal flows of recognition and respect on which status for each actor rests.
Keeping with this illustration, we can more formally refer to the asymmetric relational matrix in table 1 as the matrix $R$ and then collect status scores recursively by Bonacich’s (1987) method as follows:

$$S_i(\alpha, \beta) = \sum_j (\alpha + \beta S_j) R_{ij}$$

where $R_{ij}$ represents the flow of deference from $j$ to $i$, and $S_i$ is an element of the vector $S$ denoting the status of individual $i$. The scaling parameter $\alpha$—which imposes zero-sum structure on the resultant status scores—is often chosen so that the individual for which $S_i$ equals 1 does not possess an excessively high or low level of status (Bonacich 1987:1173). We achieve this in our current example by selecting $\alpha$ such that the squared length of $S$ equals $n$ —the number of individuals in our network. That is, selecting $\alpha$ such that $S_i^2 + S_j^2 + S_k^2 + S_l^2 = 4$ ensures that if actor $i$ increases in status, at least one other member of the network must decrease in status.

In addition, the parameter $\beta$ determines the extent to which status is contagious in the sense that it diffuses through social relations (Bothner et al. 2010). If $\beta$ equals zero, status scores are perfectly correlated with individuals’ row sums in the underlying relational matrix and are thus insensitive to the status levels of those recognizing them. Returning to our illustration in table 1, this is apparent in the equal row sums of $j$ and $k$. Conversely, as $\beta$ grows larger, individuals’ status levels are increasingly shaped by their affiliates’ status levels. We set $\beta$ equal to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the largest normed eigenvalue of $R$, keeping with prior research (Podolny 2005). Using this rule for $\beta$, the sixth column of table 1 reports

13 Alternatively, equation (3) may be expressed in matrix form (and most easily computed using standard packages) as $S(\alpha, \beta) = \alpha (I - \beta R)^{-1} R 1$, where $I$ is an identity matrix and $1$ is a column vector of ones.
different status scores for \(j\) and \(k\), with \(j\) now outranking \(k\) because \(j\) receives deference from \(i\)—herself a high-status individual—more than \(k\) does.

If we view the matrix in table 1 from a different angle, it is clear that Bonacich’s (1987) measure can also readily accommodate empirical settings in which status is best thought of as hard, not soft. Consider again the entries in the first row. We viewed these entries as payments of respect accruing to individual \(i\) from his or her peers in the columns. However, for the measurement of dominance-based status, we can just as easily imagine them as recordings of \(i\)’s ascendancy over his or her peers in prior face-to-face interactions—either as literal counts of occasions in which \(i\) “pecked on” others, or as tallies of “wins” in recent dyadic contests. When \(\beta\) from equation (3) exceeds zero, status is high for the individual who outranks dominant alters.

Although we find Bonacich’s (1987) method especially appealing theoretically, we also wish to bring attention to pitfalls potentially facing those who implement it empirically. In our view, three themes in particular warrant close consideration.

[add: second sections on measurement and conclusion]
References


