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IT'S WHO YOU ARE AND WHO YOU KNOW: RELATING PERSONAL AND COWORKER STATUS TO INDIVIDUAL WORK OUTCOMES

Sandra Spataro, Northern Kentucky University

In organizations, the advantages of having higher informal status relative to one's coworkers are well documented. This study extends research on status in organizations to analyze the status of one's coworkers as a factor that shapes an individual's own work experiences. In this field study of three organizations, naturally emergent informal status hierarchies in organizations were analyzed to examine independent effects of one's own informal status position, as well as the average status level of his coworkers, on the individual's work outcomes. Results show one's own status position positively relates to her performance and organizational commitment, and, after controlling for one's own status, the average status of his coworkers independently contributes to his or her performance, motivation, and organizational commitment.

Conventional wisdom, backed up by a good deal of research, tells us that being at the top of a status hierarchy is always more desirable – we know there are both benefits and advantages afforded to those who are at the top of the heap (Frank, 1985; Berger & Zelditch, 1985). As a result, informal status, defined as the extent to which one is respected and held in high esteem in the eyes of his or her coworkers (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001), is coveted in organizations. Indeed, individuals strive hard to achieve informal status among their peers – sometimes more than they struggle for higher financial compensation or formal promotions (Homans, 1951; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996).

The allure of higher informal status is not difficult to understand. There is well developed theory and empirical work on how one's own status affects his or her experience in social settings. Individuals with higher informal status are given opportunities that further develop their skills and abilities (Blau, 1956; Hurwitz, Zander, and Hymovitch, 1953), they are listened to, looked up to, and have influence over others (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939; Hurwitz et al., 1953; Nelson & Berry, 1965); they receive support and help when needed and more credit and praise for a given level of performance (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939; Blau, 1956). One's status level is thus a great driver of behaviors and attitudes, with the greatest advantages afforded to those who are highest, or at least higher, in status.

But is one's own status the only thing that matters? There are naturally some opportunities that arise from interacting with those of higher status than oneself (e.g., Whyte, 1981). Rubbing elbows with higher ups is often encouraged, as is networking with those of higher status than oneself. This paper asserts that it is not only one's own status that is positively associated with attitudes and behaviors at work but also the status of his or her immediate coworkers that shapes one's own work outcomes. Specifically, while the axiom that "higher status is better" holds great merit, researchers have neglected the potential advantages to frequent interaction with those who are of still higher status than oneself. When a subgroup is composed of

members from an organization- or department-wide informal hierarchy, what are the effects of "Hobnobbing with the Elites" that are distinct from the advantages of being "King of the Hill?" This study tests the independent effects of own and coworker status on individual outcomes in a field study of three different organizations and looks further at interactions between own and coworker status to see who is most affected by the joint effects of being "on top" and working with those on top.

INFORMAL STATUS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizational researchers have long acknowledged the importance of informal organizational structures – that is, the informal relations that develop between workers and give rise to organized patterns of conduct (e.g., Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939; Lawrence & Seiler, 1965). Informal status systems reflect emergent differences in respect and prominence among coworkers, established in a ranking of individuals according to prestige or social standing (Blau & Scott, 1963). These distinctions represent "evaluations made of the worth, prestige, honor, or respect of actors" (Anderson, Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1969: 269). Thus, an individual's informal status is "the respect he and his opinions command among his fellows, and their consequent tendency to defer to him in social interaction" (Blau & Scott, 1963: 97).

Informal status hierarchies in organizations stand in contrast to formal hierarchies. Formal status differences in organizations are imposed by the institutional structure, such as with job levels, ranks, or titles. In contrast, informal status is more organic, emerging naturally from interactions within the group (e.g., Bales, 1951; Owens & Sutton, 1999; Whyte, 1943). Formal and informal status might be empirically correlated, as people in positions of authority more easily garner respect and esteem; however, they are conceptually distinct (e.g., one can imagine the boss who is not well respected). People of the same rank can differ significantly in prestige (Cohen & Zhou, 1991).

The importance of informal coworker interactions in organizations, along with the paucity of research exploring how the composition of one's work group from a broader array of status levels (as in a department or whole organization) affects work processes and outcomes, lay the foundation for my research question: How does informal status level of one's coworkers affect his/her attitudes and behaviors at work?

INFORMAL STATUS AND WORK OUTCOMES

One's Own Status

Most generally, status endows individuals with power over others (Adams, 1965). This power is in part due to observers' expectations of a high status individual. Specifically, observers who have high expectations of a focal individual, based on the focal individual's high status, tend to act in ways to realize their expectations and thus enable more performance opportunities and feedback for high status individuals (Berger, et al, 1977). As a valued property, status indicates the closeness of one's characteristics to those held as ideal by the organization and garners the approval of others. High status represents a "taken for granted" association with rewards and performance outcomes (Knottnerus, 1997:126). This association implies that higher status leads to higher expected performance and allocation of greater rewards.

Observers come to expect more of individuals with high status and will aid the individual in achieving those expectations (e.g., Berger, et al, 1977). For example, students and teachers who perceive certain students as higher status will aid the higher status students to fulfill higher performance expectations (McAninch, Milich, & Harris, 1996). Increased resources for performance combined with greater expectations and support from others will likely aid individuals in their work (e.g., Geis, 1993). Furthermore, the status - performance relationship may be cyclical. That is, performing well may increase informal status in itself (e.g., Fisek, 1974), as part of the process by which status hierarchies are self-reinforcing.

Organizational commitment may also be related to status levels. Specifically, organizational commitment based on feelings of identification with the organization and internalization of the organization's values, referred to previously as normative commitment (Caldwell, Chatman, & O'Reilly, 1990), likely varies with status levels. Individuals identify more strongly with aspects of themselves that carry high status value (Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997). When the individual garners high status in his or her organization, he or she is therefore more likely to identify with it and to consider it an integral aspect of his or her self-concept (e.g., Mael, 1988). Higher identification with the organization and internalization of the organization's values together imply greater normative attachment to the organization (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986).

Informal status is also likely related to work motivation. Individuals who enjoy high status are likely compelled to continue the work that affords them this benefit. That is, if an individual perceives the work he or she does to be associated with the high status he or she enjoys in the organization, that work may make him or her feel competent and self-satisfied and therefore more motivated (e.g., Deci, 1980; Swann, Pelham, Brett, & Krull, 1989). Additionally, the greater one's achievement, the more meaningful are high level goals within the organization and the more motivated the individual is to strive for them (Locke & Latham, 1990). As the highest status levels of the informal hierarchy become more proximal, to the extent people believe they can increase their status (e.g., Owens & Sutton, 1999; Markovsky, Smith, & Berger, 1984), the individual will likely be more motivated at work to improve their reputation and others' expectations of them by working hard and better. Finally, demonstrations of motivation may also contribute to others' performance expectations of an individual and therefore increase his or her status (Berger, et al, 1977). For example, Sutton and Hargadon (1996) showed how team members increased their status relative to others in their work group by exerting greater effort and spending more time working to generate more and better ideas for the group. Altogether, this logic suggests:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals' informal status will be positively related to their job performance, organizational commitment, and work motivation.

Coworkers' Status

Despite the clear advantages of being at the top of the heap, one can also benefit from working closely with those who are of even higher status. Though status hierarchies have been shown to emerge within small groups (e.g., Bales, 1951; Berger & Zelditch, 1985), in groups that are subsets of a larger hierarchy, members import the status from that larger hierarchy into their smaller work groups (e.g., Pugh & Wahman, 1983). For example, imagine an organization with employees named "One" to "One Hundred", where status levels correspond perfectly to names. That is, Ms. 100 is held in the highest esteem, and Mr. 1 carries the least prestige or prominence in the organization. As an organization, all employees are part of a single hierarchy. Then there are collaborative groups within that hierarchy. In one group, 7 may be on a product development team with 42, 29, and 77. What are the implications for each of those individuals of the status mix of their working group?

Potential benefits of interacting with those of higher status include reflected or transferred status simply from comingling with the higher ups as well as access to role models and teachers. Podolny (2005) discussed the concept of status leakage as a detriment to high status firms that associate with lower status others – their high status firms would lose some of the cache by associating downward. In

the scenario theorized here, the lower status member recognizes such "leakage" from higher status associates as a benefit. These boosts in one's own status from associating with coworkers higher in status may similarly boost work outcomes as theorized above.

Interaction with higher status coworkers may also spur motivation and commitment. A low status group member who perceives his or her status to be changeable may see the experience of working with high status counterparts as an opportunity to increase his or her value in the organization (e.g., Ellemers, Wilke & Van Knippenberg, 1993) and may thus exert greater effort to attain such success. Feelings of greater identification with the organization likely follow.

Finally, there may also be imitation opportunities afforded those who associate with higher status others. Informal status is a social construction, so perception is reality. To the extent one can observe and then learn or even imitate high status behaviors, he or she may benefit in the eyes of the broader coworker population and enhance their own status. That is, individuals may learn and adopt high status behaviors from high status coworkers and thus perform at a higher level. For example, Aronson & Bridgeman (1979) found that low status school children performed significantly better when they worked together with high status students on an interdependent task than when they worked with similar low status students.

Hypothesis 2: Controlling for one's own status, the status levels of his/her coworkers will be positively related to his/her performance, organizational commitment, and motivation.

Joint Effects of Own and Coworker Status

The predictions above consider one's own status level and coworker status as separate components, each contributing independently to one's experiences at work. While the relationships described above could be simply additive, such that the benefits of high status and status proximity simply build on each other, the relationship may not be so simple. In particular, given the difference in resources and opportunities afforded to individuals based on their own status, it is likely those of higher status themselves are better positioned to exploit the opportunities presented by comingling with higher status coworkers (e.g. Blau, 1956; Wharton & Baron, 1987). When high status individuals work together, a greater flow of resources to them may allow buffering of any one individual who may experience temporary shortfall, and to the extent that observers expect all the individuals within a group to perform well, they will likely facilitate the performance of the group as a whole and each member within it (Berger, et al, 1977).

By cause or effect of their position, high status individuals may also be more poised psychologically to benefit from high status coworkers. High status individuals

working with others who also enjoy high status in the organization will also likely experience a stronger identification with their high status in-group. Similarity of high-status leads to stronger in-group favoritism than similarity of low-status (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987). And Ellemers and her colleagues showed that both high and low status individuals find membership in a high-status in-group more attractive than membership in a low status group (Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992). Further, one basis for organizational commitment based on identification with the organization is the extent to which membership in the organization makes the individual feel proud (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). To the extent that social comparisons based on relative status affect feelings of pride and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Festinger, 1954), working with similarly high-status others may engender great pride for high-status individuals.

Thus, one's own status will likely moderate the relationship of coworker status to one's own work outcomes, such that high status workers will experience much stronger effects of the variation in coworkers' status:

Hypothesis 3: An individual's status level will moderate the relationship of coworkers' status to his/her performance, organizational commitment, and motivation, such that the effect of coworker status will be greater for individuals with higher personal status.

METHOD

Research Design and Samples

This study observed naturally occurring status hierarchies in three organizations and the attitudes and experiences of employees within them. All three organizations were located in the United States. The first organization was the family medicine department of a West Coast research hospital, comprised of four separate health clinics, managed by medical doctors and populated by medical and administrative staff, as well as a centralized staff of administrators and faculty. The second organization was a consulting firm that specialized in brand and image development for their business clients. This firm consulted on both internet and print identity as well as business development, and the employee population included artistic designers, computer programmers, business professionals, as well as administrative and general management support. Two of the firm's three United States offices (one on the West Coast and one on the East Coast) participated in the study. The third participating organization was an engineering department within the West Coast offices of a telecommunications firm. This department provided technical support for the company's telecommunications installations at client sites and was comprised of primarily engineers and technicians along with some general managers

and administrative support individuals. All levels of employees of the participating organizations (e.g., administrative staff, professionals, technical support, etc.) were included in the study.

Data Collection

I utilized three primary sources of data in all three firms. First, participants supplied information via survey responses about their own attitudes and behaviors at work; second, workgroup members described the status levels of their coworkers, also via survey responses; and third, management and human resource groups provided personnel data regarding performance as well as some demographic characteristics of participants (e.g., sex, tenure).

The survey included information about the respondent as well as the respondent's ratings of the status of some coworkers. Surveys to the hospital and consulting firm were administered remotely by mail. In total, one hundred out of one hundred sixty members of the hospital department returned surveys, for a response rate at the hospital of 62.50%. At the consulting firm, the total response rate was 47.50%, with 57 of 120 individuals responding. In the engineering department of the telecommunications firm, the survey administration was conducted on-site and incorporated into a larger business process reengineering project the department was undergoing. The response rate in this organization was 93%, as 184 of 197 individuals returned surveys. The combined sample for the three organizations was thus comprised of 341 individuals, with an aggregate response rate of 71%.

VARIABLES

Independent Variables

Informal Status Level

Based on previous research (e.g., Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2000), coworker ratings were used to measure influence. Through preliminary interviews, appropriate subgroups (e.g., departments) from which to collect peer-ratings were identified. Surveys were delivered to all members of the subgroups involved. It was infeasible to ask everyone to rate all other subgroup members, so participants rated 10 randomly selected coworkers on the following four dimensions of status: "respected," "valued," "influential," and "overall status" at work on a scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high). Because there was sufficiently high inter-rater agreement among the raters for each dimension for each focal individual (average ICC = .75), the ratings for each dimension were averaged, then the mean of the four dimensions was calculated for each individual ($\alpha = .91$) to indicate their informal status in the organization. The mean status level was 4.97, with a standard deviation of .91.

Coworker Status

Since coworker status is relevant only to the extent individuals are aware of and may compare themselves to others in their work unit, the reference group for purposes of calculating coworker status in this study was the subgroup from which raters were drawn for a focal individual. For example, coworker status for an individual in a clinic in the hospital sample was calculated as the average status level of his or her coworkers in that clinic, rather than in the whole department. Similarly, since engagement teams in the consulting firm are transitory and membership on them may account for anywhere from 10% to 100% of a consultant's time, these groups are not meaningful for analyses of the effects of ongoing interaction with similar- or different-status others. Thus, in this organization, coworker status was determined from the others in the same office as the focal individual. Across organizations, coworker status ranged from 4.40 to 6.32, with a mean of 4.96 ($s.d. = .31$).

Dependent Variables

Organizational commitment and motivation were assessed through survey responses, as described below. Performance data were provided by one of the organizations' management teams.

Job Performance

Only the Telecommunications firm provided objective performance data. The consulting firm conducted performance ratings, but these were primarily for employee development purposes. The research hospital did not collect or track systematic performance data for their employees.

Managers within the engineering department of the telecommunications firm tracked various objective indicators of both quality and quantity of employee performance, including number of jobs completed, efficiency ratios, and number of errors committed. These statistics were available for all those performing engineering tasks within the department ($n = 186$). For each performance statistic, the department management tracked a goal amount as well as the employee's actual achievement on that dimension. Percentage achievement was calculated as the quotient of actual achievement over goal for each statistic. A principal components factor analysis of performance percentages yielded three unambiguous performance factors. The first factor, accounting for 42.29% of the variance included the following four performance statistics relating to quantity and timing of jobs completed: number of specifications (technical assessments), number of drawings, number of required dates met, and variance from standard efficiency targets. As this factor accounted for the greatest variance, included the most items, and clustered items most directly related to both effectiveness and efficiency of the work, the items included in it were used to comprise the performance variable. These four indicators of performance showed high reliability, with an alpha coefficient of .75, so

percentages were standardized within dimensions and then the dimensions were averaged to form a single indicator of performance within the telecommunications firm with a mean of .09 and a standard deviation of .74.

Organizational Commitment

Following Caldwell, Chatman, & O'Reilly (1990), organizational commitment was measured using the eight items from O'Reilly and Chatman's (1986) 12-item scale that correspond to identification- and internalization-based commitment. These two bases combined are referred to as normative commitment (Caldwell, Chatman, & O'Reilly, 1990), capturing the extent to which an employee feels affectively attached to the organization, or identifies with it, as well as the extent to which the employee has internalized the organization's values. The eight items include, for example, "What this firm stands for is important to me," and "I feel a sense of 'ownership' for this organization rather than just being an employee." Respondents rated each statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Each participant's normative commitment to the organization was indicated by the mean of the eight items ($\alpha = .90$). Values were standardized within organizations and then combined. The resulting variable had a mean of 0.00 and a standard deviation of 1.00.

Motivation

One's motivation at work was measured in this study by Lawler and Hall's (1970) motivation scale. Respondents indicated their agreement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with four items relating to job

motivation, including: "I feel a great sense of personal satisfaction when I do my job well" and "When I perform my job well, it contributes to my personal growth and development." Overall motivation was calculated as the average of these items ($\alpha = .92$). To account for variation in motivation across organizations, motivation scores were standardized within each organization and then combined. The mean of the resulting combined variable was 0.00 ($s.d. = 1.00$).

Control Variables

As individual difference variables have been associated with various work outcomes (e.g., Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986; Staw & Ross, 1985), and the focus here is specifically on interactions among coworkers of different status levels, agreeableness was a control variable in all equations. This was measured in the survey using John, Donahue, & Kentle's (1991) Big Five inventory. Additionally, to isolate the potential effects of length of service to the organization and place in the formal hierarchy on work outcomes, regression models included controls for tenure (self-reported) and job level (as provided by the organization) in all equations. Finally, models included dummy variables for the different organizations.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations Among Study Variables

	\bar{X}	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Org. dummy - Cons. Firm	0.27	0.45	--										
2. Org dummy - Hospital	0.33	0.47	-.43 **	--									
3. Org dummy - Telecom.	0.39	0.49	-.50 **	-.57 **	--								
4. Tenure (months)	64.73	83.77	-.22 **	.05	.12 *	--							
5. Formal Job Level	1.83	1.85	.26 **	.09 *	-.33 **	.12 *	--						
6. Personality - Agreeable	4.09	0.55	-.21 **	.05	.11 *	.01	-.18 **	--					
7. Status Level	4.97	0.91	.07	.07	-.14 **	.13 *	.37 **	-.02	--				
8. Coworker Status	4.96	0.31	.23 **	.21 **	-.41 **	-.09	.18 **	-.03	.33 **	--			
9. Performance	0.09	0.74	n/a	n/a	n/a	-.18	-.13	-.12	.23 *	.44 *	--		
10. Motivation	0.00	1.00	.00	.00	.00	.13 *	.08	.16 **	.07	.11 *	.03	--	
11. Normative Commitment	0.00	1.00	.00	.00	.00	.09	.03	.19 **	.14 *	.13 *	.09	.36 **	--

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

The predictions offered above were tested using hierarchical regression analyses (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The sample for equations predicting organizational commitment and motivation is pooled from all three organizations. For equations predicting performance, the sample is the department from the telecommunications organization. The results of the tests of Hypotheses 1 – 3 about how status level, coworker status, and their

interactions each relate to work outcomes are found in Tables 2 through 4.

Hypotheses 1 positively related status level to performance, motivation, and organizational commitment. The tests of this hypothesis are in Table 2. The results of the tests of Hypotheses 2, relating coworker status to work outcomes are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Linear Regression Results¹:
Predicting Work Outcomes from Own Status Level

	1	2	3
	Performance	Motivation	Organizational Commitment
<u>1. CONTROL VARIABLES</u>			
Org. dummy - Hospital		-0.01	0.00
Org. dummy - Cons. Firm		0.06	0.06
Job Level	-0.16	0.09	0.03
Tenure	-0.17 *	0.13 *	0.11
Personality - Agreeableness	-0.12	0.19 **	0.20 **
Change in R ²	0.06	0.05	0.05
Adjusted R ²	0.03	0.04	0.03
<u>2. STATUS LEVEL</u>	0.33 **	0.04	0.13 *
Change in R ²	0.06	0.00	0.02
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.04	0.04
Full equation F-ratio	3.33 *	3.14 **	5.23 **
Full equation R²	0.12	0.06	0.06
Degrees of freedom	4, 98	6, 325	6, 326

+p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p≤.01

¹Entries represent standardized coefficients

TABLE 3

**Hierarchical Linear Regression Results¹:
Predicting Work Outcomes from Coworker Status**

	1	2	3
	Performance	Motivation	Organizational Commitment
1. CONTROL VARIABLES			
Org. dummy - Hospital		-0.01	-0.03
Org. dummy - Cons. Firm		0.06	0.06
Job Level	-0.23 *	0.07	0.00
Tenure	-0.13	0.12 *	0.10
Personality - Agreeableness	-0.12	0.19 **	0.19 **
Own Status Level	0.26 **	0.06	0.13 *
Change in R ²	0.12	0.06	0.06
Adjusted R ²	0.08	0.04	0.05
2. COWORKER STATUS			
	0.38 **	0.16 **	0.14 *
Change in R ²	0.11	0.02	0.01
Adjusted R ²	0.19	0.05	0.06
Full equation F-ratio	5.82 **	3.63 **	3.73 **
Full equation R²	0.23	0.07	0.08
Degrees of freedom	5, 97	7, 324	7, 318

+p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p≤.01

¹Entries represent standardized coefficients

One's own status level is positively related to his or her performance (Equation 1, $\beta = .33$; $p < .01$) and organizational commitment ($\beta = .13$; $p < .05$), but not to motivation ($\beta = .04$, n.s.); offering partial support for Hypothesis 1. As predicted, controlling for one's own status, coworker status is significantly related to work outcomes (Equation 1, Performance, $\beta = .47$, $p < .01$; Equation 2, Motivation, β

$= .16$, $p < .05$; Equation 3, Commitment, $\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 2 is thus fully supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted moderating effects of status level on the relationship of coworker status to the various work outcomes analyzed here. The results of the tests of this hypothesis are in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Hierarchical Linear Regression Results¹:
Predicting Work Outcomes from Own and Coworker Status Interactions

	1 Performance	2 Motivation	3 Organizational Commitment
1. CONTROL VARIABLES			
Org. dummy - Hospital		-0.01	-0.03
Org. dummy - Cons. Firm		0.06	0.05
Job Level	-0.13	0.09	0.05
Tenure	-0.15	0.13 *	0.11
Personality - Agreeableness	-0.11	0.19 **	0.20 **
Change in R^2	0.06	0.05	0.05
Adjusted R^2	0.03	0.04	0.03
2. STATUS LEVEL			
	0.26 **	0.06	0.13 *
Change in R^2	0.06	0.00	0.01
Adjusted R^2	0.08	0.04	0.05
3. COWORKER STATUS			
	0.38 **	0.16 **	0.14 *
Change in R^2	0.19	0.02	0.01
Adjusted R^2	0.19	0.05	0.06
4. INTERACTION			
	2.90 *	-0.35	1.04
Change in R^2	0.02	0.00	0.00
Adjusted R^2	0.21	0.05	0.06
Full equation F-ratio	5.41 **	3.18 **	3.47 **
Full equation R^2	0.25	0.08	0.10
Degrees of freedom	6, 96	8, 316	8, 317

+ $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$

¹Entries represent standardized coefficients

While the interaction of status and coworker status was not significant in predicting motivation ($\beta = -.35$, n.s.) or commitment ($\beta = 1.04$, n.s.), the interaction was significant in the equation predicting performance ($\beta = 2.90$, $p < .05$).

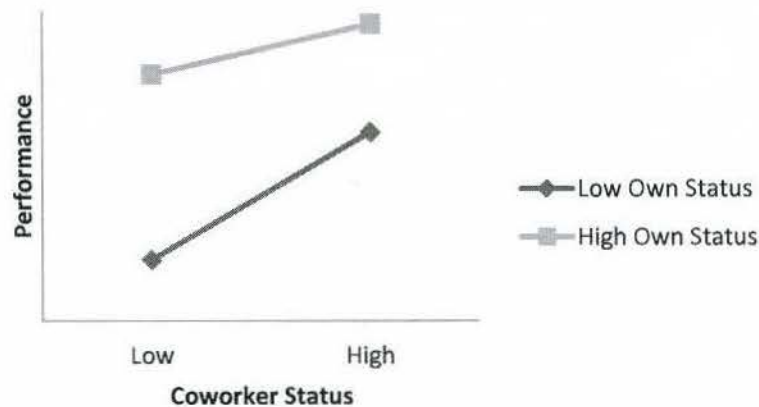
However, the form of the significant interaction predicting performance was not as hypothesized. Hypothesis 3 posited the relationship of coworker status to performance was stronger for those with high status themselves when, in fact,

the opposite was true. The relationship of coworker status to performance was actually stronger for those with lower status. To depict the form of the interaction graphically, predicted levels of performance based on one standard

deviation below and above both own status and coworker status were calculated; these analyses are displayed in the Figure.

FIGURE

Interaction: Performance



As two of the three predicted interactions were not significant, and the one significant interaction was of a different form than hypothesized, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that informal status positions are related to work outcomes in two ways. First, one's own status level is positively related to performance and normative commitment (H1). And, second, after controlling for one's own status level, the average level of one's coworkers' status is significantly positively related to one's own performance, motivation, and organizational commitment (H2). Finally, though different from what was predicted, this study shows that own status moderates the relationship of coworker status to performance (H3), such that lower status individuals benefit more than higher status individuals from interacting with higher status coworkers. The results of this study, therefore, offer support for the importance of taking into account the status of one's coworkers in addition to his or her own status when analyzing attitudes and behaviors in organizations.

The benefits of having higher status have been well-documented in past research. However, the benefits to work outcomes of coworkers being of higher status run contrary to existing status theory, which relies primarily on the deference of low status players to their higher status counterparts in all forms of social interaction as the bases for the many behavioral and attitudinal advantages that come from status (e.g., Berger, et al, 1977). Here, the benefits of having high status hold. But, at the same time, there are

clearly distinct additional benefits to associating with those of high status, regardless of one's own status level. The networks literature has long-recognized the potential benefits of one's ties to others within the organization, mostly in terms of being more central in both formal and informal networks (e.g., Cross & Cummings, 2004). And theory on firm status in markets (e.g., Podolny, 2005) has demonstrated how status can be transferred or "leaked" from high status others to one who interacts with them. Still, there is much less known about how interacting with high (or low) status others is directly related to one's own performance and attitudes at work. This study documents clear and consistent effects of coworker status that are independent of one's own status level.

The implications of these findings for managers are multi-faceted. For high-status employees, the implication is clear: working within higher status others can improve both behaviors and attitudes. Star performers and highly respected individuals should look up the status hierarchy for collaborators rather than be focused solely on leading or developing others below them. And for existing low status employees, the potential positive effects of working with higher status others are even greater. Developmental plans for those of lower status should include targeted interaction with higher status others.

Limitations and Future Studies/Extensions

What is not clear from the current study are the mechanisms that might be at play when an individual's work outcomes are directly affected by the status of his or her coworkers. It could be that exposure to higher status others

generates exposure to new and different information or work processes and learning is the primary mechanism, or it could be a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby individuals re-categorize themselves based on the status of their coworkers and then perform to that level (higher or lower). Understanding the specific processes at play would be useful for both theory and practice. This is of particular interest considering the unexpected result here that lower status individuals benefited more than high status individuals from interacting with higher status coworkers.

The current study offers a number of additional opportunities for extensions and raises research questions for future studies. First, a natural extension of this work would establish direction in the status to outcomes relationship. Does performance cause status or vice versa? Or, if both are at play, how do they interact and affect one another to determine status positions? Additionally, the frequency of interaction with coworkers and the intensity of the collaboration might moderate the effects of coworker status on work outcomes. Indeed, too much interaction among only high status individuals may eventually hurt individual and group performance (Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011). Coworker status is clearly a significant contributor to workplace behaviors and attitudes. Future work to explore and extend these effects will increase our understanding of how status processes operate in organizations.

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