

STATUS PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the proposition that people perceive the status of objects in a system differently as a function of their own status positions. The neglect of adequate, systematic investigation of the problem in the areas of community and occupational prestige is noted and the phenomena of differential status perceptions examined with data on the popularity judgments within a high school senior class. The importance of general and systematic variations in perceptions as a function of the perceiver's status position is discussed.

STATUS PERCEPTIONS¹

Ever since Marx, ideological theorists have insisted that one's position in the social structure profoundly influences his perspective on the system. The literature in sociology is full of studies showing that social class makes important differences in attitudes, values, and life-styles. But there is one area in which consensual perceptions across social strata constitute the overwhelming emphasis. Strangely enough, this research deals with the very perception of status itself--occupational prestige judgments. Davies (1952) searched futilely among prestige perception studies for differences in status perceptions by the social position of the perceiver, but he had to conclude that more than a quarter-century of research revealed only a "remarkable consensus".

The impression of remarkable consensus has been reinforced by the results reported in the two decades since Davies' review of the literature. Study after study stresses correlations of +.98 and better between the status judgments of different strata within and between most industrialized societies. But this impression--that social position does not influence status perceptions--is inconsistent with most societal theories. Furthermore, it conflicts with a vast amount of evidence in psychophysics and social psychology (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Helson, 1964) showing that a person's position (or anchor standard) on any judgmental scale influences his perception of stimuli along that dimension. And, finally, the illusion of remarkable consensus simply does not fit the data from many of the studies that foster it.

The problem of differential status perceptions is an important one, and it needs to be reclaimed as an area deserving sociological scrutiny. Aside from the theoretical relevance of the phenomena per se, there are many research questions that presume knowledge of and require measurement of status perceptions. For instance: Status incongruity assumes perceived distinctions and discrepancies in several status-orders that affect a person's self-regard and others' treatments of him. Problems of distributive justice necessarily involve placement of self and socially compared others in status positions. And, of course, any concern with levels of aspiration and achievement orientation fundamentally implicates perceived status distinctions.

Status is a critical variable that governs the rights and rules of co-orientation and the flow of social interaction. The primary purpose of this paper is to establish that systematic perceptual differences do exist in status structures as a function of the perceiver's position and to suggest that these are general properties of all types of status systems. After noting the literature on status perception, new research evidence will be presented and its implications discussed.

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The pioneering and now-classic series of studies by W. Lloyd Warner (1949) remains the most comprehensive body of research in the area of community prestige. The most cogent statement of class-related differences in status perceptions that emerged from this series appeared in Davis, Gardner, and Gardner (1941, p.72 circa). They noted two tendencies:

(1) Prestige distinctions decrease in fineness with increasing "social distance" between judge and adjudged; and (2) people tend to enhance their relative prestige in a system by utilizing many or few judgmental categories, so that the number of perceived classes increases with the status of the judge.

Lewis (1964) noted that the "social distance" and "ego-enhancement" generalizations are somewhat inconsistent and he suggested an appropriate reformulation: People make the finest distinctions in those adjacent areas of the social structure that are most familiar and relevant to them, but they avoid doing so above their own positions, because this tends to lower self-evaluation. One would expect to find such propositions systematically explored with the data from occupational prestige studies, especially since these studies have employed more adequate sampling and more sophisticated methodological techniques. However, investigators in this area have usually been more impressed by the correlational consensus among respondents.

In an extensive analysis of the 1950 NORC data, Reiss briefly comments: "The most obvious difference in the ratings of occupations by economic level, both in terms of rank and prestige-increment criteria, is the tendency for poor people to rate almost all occupations...higher than do the prosperous, with the middle class generally intermediate in position" (Reiss, 1961, p.175). But the obvious is not stressed.

We can get an idea of the magnitude of these status differences in the NORC ratings by considering how people rated those occupations known to at least 95 percent of the sample (63 of 90). The percentage of "excellent" or "good" ratings received by the lower-status two-thirds of these occupations

differed substantially by the status of the judge: above-average respondents gave them 34 percent, while below-average respondents gave them 68 percent "excellent" or "good" ratings. It is indeed obvious that there are large differences in the way the occupational prestige hierarchy is perceived by respondents at different status levels.

To get a better picture of differential status perceptions as a function of the perceiver's position and to establish the generality of the phenomena across a range of status structures, it seemed advantageous to move away from the areas of occupational or community prestige. To minimize methodological problems "popularity"-status judgments in a high school class were selected for investigation. This eliminated entirely the difficulties of sampling--especially acute in selecting occupations to be judged--by permitting inclusion of the entire universe of judges and judgmental objects. Knowledge could be determined rather directly. Furthermore, an informal collectivity has no historically established barriers to communication and information nor any specialization of task-functions, associational patterns, and structurally determined visibility channels. Finally, a high school class is sufficiently different from community or national occupational prestige structures that claims of generality are more plausible.

The status structures to which these results will be generalized are here defined as consensual orderings of persons or positions on a consensually evaluated dimension by knowledgeable and involved members of a social system. For there to be a structure, rank-order consensus must exist; and, further, there must be agreement within the collectivity on the evaluation of the dimension of judgment (that is, consensus that "high" status is better than

"low" status). The definition is appropriately broad, including any collectivities, from small groups to national societies, in which individuals, positions, or attributes are similarly ranked in terms of a consensually valued dimension.

Method

A school in a middle income suburb was selected on the basis of socio-economic composition, class size and geographical dispersion of students. The 161 students whom the school classified as seniors were asked to judge the popularity and to report their "liking" for each of the same-sex others in their class. Popularity was judged on a 9-point, unlabelled continuum, ranging from LOW to HIGH. Attraction judgments were secured in a similar manner, after the popularity responses had been obtained.

To insure that respondents were knowledgeable and the judgmental universe "known", judgments by and about students were removed if they did not judge or were not judged by eighty percent of their classmates. A person was judged unless the respondent "never heard of him" or knew "nothing about him at all". Fourteen students were eliminated. The popularity ranking for each sex was then determined by the responses of the 147 seniors remaining. They were divided into approximately equal thirds (25-24-25 for males, 24-25-24 for females). All data were initially analyzed separately by sex (Alexander, 1965, pp. 161-187); but they are averaged here, since it simplifies presentation and does not change the conclusions.

Additional students were then eliminated as judges (but not as judgmental objects), because they were defined as "non-involved". In part, the "knowledge" criterion of elimination was rather loose, and we wanted to

supplement that basis of exclusion by removing judges who didn't feel a part of, or particularly care about, student status attributions. Also, we wanted the final population of judges to value and consensually evaluate the status dimension of judgment. And, theoretically, involvement was included, because it has been such an important variable in studies of other types of displacements in social judgment (Sherif and Hovland, 1961).

Two questions were used to tap involvement, both quite direct: "How important is it to you to be popular with your senior classmates here in school?" and "Would you say you are mostly on the 'inside' of things that go on around your school?" If the person indicated that he neither felt on the inside of things nor felt it important to be popular, he was eliminated as "uninvolved". Nearly equal numbers were eliminated from each status level by sex; 3, high; 8, middle; and 15, low status males were dropped, while the corresponding figures were 2, 7, and 15 for females.

Among the remaining knowledgeable and involved respondents, it is requisite that there be some consensus about the rank-ordering of judgmental objects. Even though rank-consensus is all that is required, the Pearsonian coefficients are convenient and make the lack of difference in comparisons among strata even more dramatic. The mean of the correlations between individuals' popularity judgments and the (consensually established) mean values of the objects rated are remarkably similar--.79, .77, and .76, for high, middle, and low status judges, respectively.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean popularity and attraction judgments of involved judges' mean judgments, by popularity of the judge and judged. The data on

popularity show the expected pattern. The lower status judges give everyone higher ratings, especially those at their own level. The attraction judgments are also of interest. Judges at each level are more attracted to those of higher status; but, compared to judges at other levels, lowers find lowers more attractive. The contrasting patterns for popularity and attraction show that we are not dealing with the "same" phenomenon in these two areas.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Since there still remains the possibility that "real" knowledge differs interactively by status of judge and status of judged, ignorance could influence these results. This is an unnecessary complication; because interest lies, not in how particular objects are placed, but in the overall judgmental pattern as a function of the judge's position. Thus, in the following tables, the "objective" status of the person-objects being judged will be ignored. For each judge the upper, middle, and lower third of the status order will be defined by his individual ordering. In other words, judgmental "thirds" refer to divisions in each judge's judgmental distribution, rather than to "consensual" categorization.

Table 2 shows that differences in mean judgments of upper and lower thirds are much greater than mean judgments of consensually classified objects: Compared to Table 1, the top third is judged higher and the bottom lower by respondents at each position. This indicates that judges at each level make "errors" in their status assignments, when the standard of accuracy is the overall mean ranking. However, the direction and magnitude of differences

among judges at each popularity level are virtually unaffected by changing the classification of judgmental objects from an "objective" to a "subjective" ordering. The advantage of the subjective distribution is that it eliminates any possibility that differential knowledge is affecting the popularity distributions of judges at different positions in the system.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Having established that there are systematic "contrast effects" in status judgments as a function of the judge's own status position, we can now examine the possibility that his perception of his own status independently influences a person's status judgments. Respondents were asked to rate their own popularity. When objective position is held constant, we anticipated that judgments would vary directly with the level of self-placement or subjective positioning. Judges were classified to maximize the number in each cell of the table: High, if they put themselves in the top three scale categories; Low, if self-placed in the bottom four; and Medium, if in the remaining two.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 presents the mean of each judge's mean popularity judgments in each third of his judgmental distribution--by popularity and self-placement. The comparisons show that both objective and subjective position influence judgments, when the other is held constant. Mean popularity judgments vary inversely with the judge's consensually-defined popularity status in 23 of 24 comparisons (3 ties). They vary directly with the judge's subjectively-defined self-placement in 23 of 25 comparisons (2 ties).

It is clear that substantial and systematic differences exist in the perception of status as a function of the perceiver's statuses--as defined by others and himself. This has been demonstrated with judgments of popularity among high school senior classmates. The data on "objective position" effects seem consistent with a variety of studies dealing with the status of occupations in national prestige structures and persons in community prestige studies. The independent influence of self-definition of status is an interesting and important finding that has not been adequately explored in other types of status systems (Blau, 1957).

Discussion

There are two broad, perspectival antinomies that coexist in the social and psychological branches of social psychology. Sociologically, it is generally maintained that social reality is defined by consensus about the attribute values of social objects; and status is certainly the most critical social attribute within this tradition. Perceptual-judgmental-social psychology, however, has argued that an individual's cognitive structuring of stimuli realms depends upon his location (anchor, standard, position) within the realm.

Both traditions stress that their opposing predictions should be most evident when the objects and events are significant to actors and important for societal functioning. Both agree that these important areas are usually those in which stimulus values are defined by "social reality". Thus, on the one hand, interaction is inconceivable without shared cognitive categorizations of relevant objects of mutual orientation; but, on the other, there is impressive and undeniable documentation that individuals differ systematically in the way they perceptually structure object-universes.

Regarding the perception of status attributes, we cannot assume a social reality above the ordinal level. Rather, there must be pluralistic, but systematically definable, social realities regarding the absolute stimulus values of objects in status structures. The data analyzed show that this is indeed the case, and that these differences depend upon the independent influences of objective and subjective positionings of judges within the status systems. Since these differences should influence the way people act and interact, they need to be given more extensive theoretical attention.

If this area is explored systematically, we may find that people are responding to their differential perceptions of the "same" status-related attributes rather than giving different responses to perceptually similar worlds. Apart from learning more about the cognitive impact of social structures on the persons who encounter them from different perspectives, further study will undoubtedly lead us to clarify and refine theoretical formulations that base their hypotheses on the perceived stimulus values of status-objects. There is hardly a more critical or central aspect of social reality that deserves precise theoretical definition and measurement in sociology.

TABLE 1

MEAN POPULARITY AND ATTRACTION JUDGMENTS--BY
POPULARITY OF JUDGES AND JUDGED

<u>Popularity of Judge</u>	<u>JUDGMENTS OF</u>					
	<u>Popularity</u>			<u>Attraction</u>		
	<u>Popularity of Judged</u>			<u>Popularity of Judged</u>		
	<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>
High	6.7	4.7	3.1 (44)	6.7	5.3	3.7 (44)
Medium	6.8	5.0	3.3 (34)	6.5	5.1	3.7 (34)
Low	7.1	5.5	3.8 (19)	6.3	5.5	4.4 (19)

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF POPULARITY JUDGMENTS--BY
POPULARITY OF JUDGES

<u>Popularity of Judge</u>	<u>Distribution of Popularity Judgments</u>		
	<u>Upper Third</u>	<u>Middle Third</u>	<u>Lower Third</u>
High	7.3	4.8	2.6 ₍₄₄₎
Medium	7.4	5.1	2.9 ₍₃₄₎
Low	7.7	5.6	3.4 ₍₁₉₎

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF MEAN POPULARITY JUDGMENTS --BY
POPULARITY AND SELF-PLACEMENTS OF JUDGES

<u>Popularity</u> <u>of Judge</u>	Judge's Self- <u>Placement</u>	Distribution of <u>Popularity Judgments</u>		
		<u>Upper Third</u>	<u>Middle Third</u>	<u>Lower Third</u>
High	High	7.6	5.1	2.7 (27)
	Medium	6.6	4.3	2.5 (11)
	Low	6.8	3.9	2.0 (5)
Medium	High	8.2	6.1	3.6 (7)
	Medium	7.1	4.9	2.7 (21)
	Low	6.8	4.4	2.6 (5)
Low	High	8.0	6.1	3.6 (5)
	Medium	7.5	5.5	3.6 (9)
	Low	7.7	5.5	3.0 (5)

FOOTNOTE TO TITLE

These data were gathered while the author held a Graduate Fellowship Award from the National Science Foundation, and their preparation for publication is coordinate with research being pursued under NSF grant GS-2095, "The Influence of Occupational Prestige Perceptions on Adolescents' Aspirations".

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