The cost of status attainment: Performance effects of individual's status mobility in task groups

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Abstract

Although we know that considerable benefits accrue to individuals with high versus low social status, we do not know the performance effects of gaining or losing status in one's group over time. In two longitudinal studies, we measure the status positions of middle managers currently enrolled in a part time MBA program at the beginning and end of their study group's life. In both samples, we compare the individual performance (course grades) of the students who gained or lost status to those who maintained high and low stable status positions in their groups. We find that higher status at the end of the group's life is associated with higher performance. We also find, however, that the performance of individuals who gained status over time does not correspond to their final status positions. Instead, those who gained status performed no better than did those who were in stable low status positions or who lost status over time, all of whom performed significantly worse than did those who maintained high status positions for the whole quarter. We interpret these results to suggest that people might tradeoff efforts to attain status for resources they could otherwise apply to individual performance. After replicating this effect in our second sample, we identify trait neuroticism as an antecedent of the status attainment-performance tradeoff, and increased dominance and generosity as behavioral mechanisms through which neurotic individuals successfully gain status without enhancing their performance.

There are two popular images of social status (the amount of respect, influence and prominence one has in the eyes of others (Anderson, John, Keltner & Kring 2001; Flynn 2003)) in American society. The first is a narrative about status *stability* that emphasizes how the rewards for status accumulate and reinforce each other over time. This perspective is empirically supported by the Matthew effect, for instance, whereby recognition for scientific achievement is disproportionally given to established scientists (Merton 1968). America is also the land of opportunity, however, which is a compelling narrative about status *mobility*. Opportunities for status mobility in society are among the most primary, universal human motivators (Hogan & Hogan 1991; Loch, Huberman & Stout 2000). This is because we assume that rewards accrue according to our status positions, whether we are born with a silver spoon in our mouth or we scrape our way to the top.

Reflecting the importance of status in society, it is an intense subject of academic research. Scholars have generally treated it as a very stable property of individuals and groups that is more akin to the first narrative we described above. Research has emphasized the characteristics of individuals who are most likely to be attributed with high status by their peers (e.g., Anderson et al. 2001; Berger, Cohen & Zelditch 1972; Kalkhoff & Thye 2006; Ridgeway & Erickson 2000) and the interpersonal interactions that reinforce and maintain stable status orders in groups and society (e.g., Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek & Norman 1998; Bienenstock & Bianchi 2004; Kalkhoff 2005; Ridgeway, Diekema & Johnson 1995; Zelditch 2001). Furthermore, scholars have documented the immense benefits that accrue to individuals judged as having high status, such as high compensation (Belliveau, Oreilly & Wade 1996), positive performance evaluations (Berger, Rosenholtz & Zelditch 1980), valuable exchange partners (Podolny 2005; Thye 2000), opportunities to influence group outcomes, and favorable resource allocations (Bales 1958; Bunderson 2003).

Despite the enormous attention to status in the literature, little of it has considered status dynamically. There has been some theoretical research on the *de*legitimation of status orders, that is, how the validity and acceptance of a status order may change (Berger et al. 1998). Status also has been conceptualized as a resource that can be exchanged (Turner, Foa & Foa 1971) and auctioned (Sutton & Hargadon 1996). There has been some empirical work on shifts in status relationships within groups (e.g., De Kelaita, Munroe & Tootell 2001; Goar & Sell 2005; Ridgeway 1982), but none has considered the *consequences* of gaining or losing status. Thus, our research question is: How do people who gain or lose status perform compared to those who maintain stable high and low status positions in task groups over time?

We examine this question in two longitudinal studies of middle managers currently enrolled in a part time MBA program whose status positions in their study groups are measured at the beginning and end of their study group's life. In both samples, we compare the individual performance (course grades) of the students who gained or lost status to students who maintained high and low stable status positions in their study groups. We call these four groups "status categories." Controlling for gender, work experience and self-reported satisfaction with the team, we find that high status at the end of the group's life is associated with higher performance than is low status. Counter-intuitively, however, we find that the performance of individuals who gained status over time does not correspond to their final status positions. Instead, those who gained status – even those who attained the highest status positions in their groups –performed significantly worse than did those who maintained the highest status positions for the whole quarter. The performance of those who gained status was no better than that of stable low status members and status losers. Thus, it appears that people who invest in status attainment do not reap benefits in terms of their individual performance.

Given this counter-intuitive pattern of results, we investigated *who* was likely to seek status and *what* they did to achieve it without getting a performance payoff. We found that the personality trait of neuroticism predicted status category. Neurotic individuals were ranked low in their groups' initial status hierarchies and their insecurity about those status positions apparently motivated them to seek higher status. Among those who were in the top-ranked positions in their groups at the end of the group's life, status category fully mediated the negative effect of neuroticism on performance. Furthermore, we found that neuroticism positively predicted increased dominance and generosity behaviors over time. While these behaviors were more strongly associated with status seekers than with those who maintained high stable status positions, they either hurt or did not affect individual performance. Thus, our initial results seem to be explained by the propensity for neurotic individuals to try to enhance their group status by engaging in behaviors that are deleterious or unrelated to their individual performance. Since the status seekers exerted more efforts toward these status enhancing behaviors than did the stable high status members, our results suggests that status seekers tradeoff efforts to enhance their status for those that would improve their performance, whereas high stable status members do not need to make that trade off in order to maintain their high status positions.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it highlights the distinction between status as a static versus a dynamic construct. Despite many forces that legitimate and stabilize status orders in groups, individuals do experience shifts in status positions in their groups over time and the performance implications are substantial. Second, our research indicates that the reason for the tradeoff between performance and status attainment is primarily a neurotic personality. Thus, it seems that different personality characteristics are associated with status seeking than with initial status attributions (as determined by Anderson, et al. 2001). Third, by using actual rather than perceived performance in real task groups, our observations of the status-performance effort tradeoff extends recent theoretical and experimental research in this area (Huberman, Loch & Onculer 2004; Loch et al. 2000).

STATUS DYNAMICS

Status hierarchies, “rank-ordered relationships among actors [that] describe…interactional inequalities” (Ridgeway & Walker 1995: 281) inevitably emerge in groups (Tiedens, Unzueta & Young 2007). Although many social forces serve to stabilize the emergent social orders, not all of them are legitimated (Ridgeway & Berger 1986). For instance, Anderson, et al. (2001) measured individuals’ status in a college dormitory at three points in time: two weeks into the Fall semester (time 1), after four months (time 2) and after nine months (time 3). The overall status correlation from time 1 to time 2 was .61 and from time 2 to time 3, .86 (p. 124). Thus, although the status positions stabilized considerably over time, there was still notable variation, especially in the first four months.

Some research (e.g., Barley 1986, 1996; Bechky 2003) suggests that status is continuously re-negotiated as people assert expertise and claim legitimacy (Owens & Sutton 2001; Strauss 1978). Status orders may be delegitimated if task performance requirements change such that expectations of competence become inconsistent with an established hierarchy (Berger et al. 1998; Goar & Sell 2005). Interventions that make individual’s task competencies appear inconsistent with their status characteristics can equalize the status and influence differentials in task interactions (e.g., Markovsky, Smith & Berger 1984; Pugh & Wahrman 1983). This may be particularly effective when low status individuals’ influence attempts are perceived to be motivated by advancing the group’s interests rather than their individual self-interests (Ridgeway 1982).

In addition to the ways in which status orders may be destabilized due to changes in the task environment, certain types of people are more likely to seek status than others, independent of their demographic characteristics or expertise on a particular task (Overbeck, Correll & Park 2005). Elangovan and Xie (1999), for instance, find that people with high self esteem and internal loci of control experience dissatisfaction when leadership is withheld. They may, therefore, challenge an emergent hierarchy in which they are attributed with lower status than they think they deserve (see also Polzer & Caruso 2008; Porath, Overbeck & Pearson 2008). Thus, individuals’ status positions in groups may change over time.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

We conduct two studies with separate samples of working MBA students at a large, public university. These are ideal samples for this kind of research for a number of reasons. First, these student groups had no existing formal or prescribed overarching hierarchy. Therefore, we can study the inevitable emergent status processes without confounding the influence of an organizational reporting structure. Second, the groups' tasks and consequences are real, objectively measurable and meaningful for the members – in the form of a class grade on which their employers' tuition reimbursement depends – so the setting is more realistic than it would be for a short-term group created in a laboratory to work on an experimental task. Last, the groups all began and ended at the same time and individuals worked on the same tasks, enabling direct performance comparisons that are often difficult in the field.

The research procedure was essentially the same in both studies, although different non-status questions were asked in the two studies. Data were collected from two sections in Study 1and four sections in Study 2 of 65 – 72 students who were enrolled in a required Organizational Behavior course during the first 10-week quarter of the MBA program. Students initially met and were assigned to the study groups that were used for this research during a four day orientation program prior to the beginning of the quarter. In Study 2 only, prior to this orientation program, students were surveyed about their Big Five personality traits using the 60-item NEO Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae 1992). In both studies, students were surveyed during the first week of the course (time 1) and again after the last class and right before taking their final exam (time 2), 10 weeks later. Following protocols used by Anderson, et al. (2006) and Flynn (2003), both surveys asked students to rate each member of their study group, including themselves, on a scale from 1 = very little to 7 = very much about the following characteristics: 1) To what extent does each individual make valuable contributions to the group, 2) To what extent does each individual influence the group's decisions, and 3) How much status (social respectability) does each individual have in the group?

The time 2 survey in both studies also asked students to rate their satisfaction with the team. In Study 2 only, students additionally rated each other's dominance behaviors and generosity in both surveys. Demographic data and work histories were collected from the MBA program office. Assignment grades were generated by two teaching assistants, each of whom graded all assignments for students from both sections on alternating assignments, thereby ensuring within-assignment grading consistency across sections. Final course grades were determined based on weighted points from all individual assignments throughout the quarter prior to the authors examining the survey data. Although students were obligated to complete the surveys for course credit, they voluntarily agreed to let the authors use the data for research.

STUDY 1

Hypotheses

Before presenting our hypotheses, we ask an exploratory research question about the degree of stability in group status orders. As we identified earlier, there has been little empirical research on the evolution of status orders over time to determine the extent to which status positions are immutable. The research by Anderson, et al (2001) is an exception, and as we reported earlier, they find a high degree of correlation between status positions in a college dormitory over a nine-month period, but considerably lower correlations over the first four-months of the study, especially among women. Their samples were large, non-task oriented social groups that they studied for an entire academic year. It is unclear to what extent their observations would generalize to smaller, task oriented groups with shorter life cycles that are more consistent with the focus of the majority of status research. We, therefore, ask how stable are task-oriented peer group status orders over a complete group life cycle?

Next, we develop hypotheses regarding the effects of status positions over time on individual performance. The extant status literature indicates that the higher is one's position is in the group's initial, emergent status order (hereafter called time 1), the higher is one's performance (Bales 1958). Since the group hierarchy is very stable (Anderson et al. 2001; Chase 1980), and benefits accrue to high status individuals that reinforce their status positions (Berger, Conner & Fisek 1974; Podolny 1993; Ridgeway & Berger 1986), the group's final status order (hereafter, time 2) should also predict performance. Status characteristics theory (Ridgeway 1991), however, suggests that the status valuation of demographic attributes may unfold over time through "doubly dissimilar" interactions: goal-oriented encounters between actors who differ in both demographic characteristics and resources that reinforce differing performance expectations (Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers & Robinson 1998). Thus, status characteristics theory would predict that individuals' status positions in their groups may change over time as a function of the status sorting process such that only the time 2 status order represents the legitimated hierarchy that affects individual's performance.

Although there is much evidence that one's status position enhances one's performance opportunities (e.g., Bales 1958; Berger et al. 1980; Bunderson 2003), the direction of causality could be reversed such that one's performance predicts one's final status position. To the extent that there is error in the initially formed performance expectations or the task requirements change over time, individuals may gain or lose status in their group as their true performance abilities are revealed. If this were the case, we would still expect a positive relationship between one's time 2 status position in the group and one's individual performance. Thus, whether due to the stability and reinforcement of the initial status order, the social construction of legitimated status orders or the evolution of performance expectations, the first hypothesis we derive from the literature is:

Hypothesis 1: At time 2, high status individuals will perform better than will low status individuals.

Importantly, this hypothesis implies that one's time 2 status position will implicate individual performance regardless of when the status position was attained. In other words, there should be no difference in the relationship between time 2 status position and individual performance for those whose status was conferred at the outset and maintained it and those who attained higher status positions in their groups over time.

Some research indicates, however, that individuals who seek status within their groups may do so *at the cost of* their own performance. Loch, et al. (2000) suggest that individuals have a finite amount of time to exert effort that they allocate between work (enhancing performance) and politics (enhancing status). As individuals expend relatively more effort to enhance their status, their productivity suffers. Whereas Loch, et al. (2000) consider the effects of status seeking behavior on group performance, we examine its effects on individual performance. We assume that the deleterious effects of status seeking may be even more pronounced than in their models because there is no opportunity to free-ride on the work effort of other group members. Thus, as individuals choose between exerting efforts to attain status or working hard at their individual tasks, their status seeking behavior may offset whatever positional benefits their attained status rank would afford.

Empirical evidence supports this extension of their economic models. Huberman, Loch and Onculer (2004), for instance, determined that individuals traded off material gain in order to enhance their status. Brett, Olekalns, Friedman, Goates, Anderson and Lisco (2007) found that negotiators are less likely to resolve conflicts if their "face" (social value given by others) has been attacked than if it has been preserved through the negotiation process. Hambrick and Cannella (1993) show that executives whose companies have been acquired make economically costly decisions to resign because they have lost status following the acquisition.

Flynn (2003) also shows that people's status seeking efforts may hurt their performance. This research indicates that one way individuals gain status in their groups is by exchanging favors; in particular, by being especially generous rather than indebted to others. If people are frequently performing favors for others and receiving fewer than they give in return, however, it could hinder their ability to perform their own tasks effectively because they gain no practical advantage from the favors they are owed. Indeed, Flynn (2003) finds a curvilinear effect of imbalanced favor exchange on performance such that performance declines beyond the point where people are perceived to give slightly more than they have received (p. 547). Thus, if there are costs associated with seeking status, individuals who gain status in their groups over time may not experience the same performance benefits as those who achieve high status at the outset and maintain it over time, regardless of their time 2 status positions. We, therefore, hypothesize that controlling for time 2 status positions:

Hypothesis 2: Those individuals who gain status over time do not perform as well as do those who maintain high status positions in their groups from the beginning.

Sample

99 individuals (66 men) from 24 groups of 4 – 6 people (*M* = 4.35, *s d.* = .92) agreed to participate in the research project for a 78 percent response rate. Three people were dropped from the analyses due to incomplete data for a final sample size of 96. They are 30.67 years old, on average (*s.d.* = 3.65), 62.5

percent are Asian or South Asian and 28 percent are Caucasian. On average they have 81.63 months of post-graduate work experience (*s.d.* = 39.99).

Variables

Dependent variable. We measured objective individual performance (as opposed to peer-rated perceived performance) as the overall course grade based on two individual assignments (case write ups) worth 40 percent of the final grade, a final exam comprised of a case write up and short essay questions worth 30 percent of the final grade and in-class participation from each class cumulatively worth 15 percent of the final grade. A group assignment that was worth 15 percent of the final grade is excluded from this variable. We used their aggregated grade rather than the grade from their final exam only (which would measure their performance closest to the time 2 status assessment) because it is a more accurate indication of their actual performance than is any single assignment (Polzer, Milton & Swann 2002; Rothstein 2004; Slack & Porter 1980). This variable is mean-centered by class section to eliminate any differences between sections.

Independent variables. Because we are interested in the effects of one's position within a group's status hierarchy, we used rank-ordered variables that we constructed based on peer ratings, allowing for ties. We constructed scales based on the mean teammates' ratings of each person on the contribution, influence and status items. We calculated the ICC(1) (an index of inter-rater reliability that takes into account group size) for the peer ratings of these items within teams in both time 1 and time 2. An ICC(1) value greater than .12 is generally considered acceptable (James 1982). All ICC(1) are greater than .28, indicating substantial within group reliability in the peer rankings. The scale alphas (at time 1 = .90 at time 2 = .94) suggest that combining the three items into single scales is appropriate.

We ranked individuals at time 1 and time 2 within each team based on these peer-rating scales to remove any group-level variance in the individual data. Individuals were then categorized based on the difference between their time 1 and time 2 rank order positions to create our status category variable. Note that because we are using rank data, lower values mean a person is ranked *higher* in their team (i.e., a top-ranked individual has a value = 1).

We operationalize high status as being in the top-ranked status position in one's group and all others as low status. This is because individuals in the highest status positions in their groups are the unambiguously dominant members of their groups who are most likely to reap the benefits of being high status (Chase 1980). Furthermore, the benefits of having high status, but not the high*est* status, are ambiguous (Phillips & Zuckerman 2001) and likely depend on group size.

To examine the dynamic effects of status over time, we created a "status category" variable that is a four-part measure indicating if a subject maintained stable high, stable low, gained or lost status in their group between time 1 and time 2. A person is categorized as stable high status when he or she is in the top-ranked position in both time 1 and time 2. Stable low status is operationalized as being in the same rank position at time 1 and time 2 other than the highest-ranked position. People gained status (called "status seekers") if they moved up the rank order between time 1 and time 2 and lost status if they moved down the rank order from time 1 to time 2.

Covariates. We control for gender because it has been widely used in research on status attainment (c. f. Carli, Loeber & Lafleur 1995; Eagly & Johnson 1990; Molm 1986; Ridgeway et al. 1995) and Anderson, et al. (2001) indicates that status order emergence varies by gender. We also included months of post-graduate work experience because those with more experience have been exposed to more organizational behavior issues at work and may have had more managerial experience, which could help their performance on their class assignments. In addition, we included subject's satisfaction with their team ("I was satisfied working on this team" (1= to no extent, 7= to a great extent)) because it signifies acceptance of the status order in the group that could affect their status category as well as their performance. People are more satisfied with interpersonal interactions when they experience complementary dominance and deference behaviors than when they encounter incongruent behaviors (Dryer & Horowitz 1997; Tiedens & Fragale 2003). Thus, satisfaction with the team is an attitudinal variable that likely reflects how content one is with his or her one's position in the status hierarchy. Furthermore, satisfaction with the team is a key aspect of group effectiveness (Gladstein 1984), which could affect individual's performance.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1a. In Table 1b, we report mean levels of performance across the status categories. Of the status seekers, 61.2 percent started at time 1 in the second or third highest-ranked positions (*M* = 3.32, *s. d.* = 1.04). At time 2, 41.9 percent of seekers were in the top positions on their teams (*M* = 1.87, *s. d.* = .92). Among the status losers, 39 percent started in the top-ranked positions at time 1 (*M* = 2.03, *s. d.* = 1.03). At time 2, 53.8 percent were in the second- or third-highest positions (*M* = 3.50, *s. d.* = .95). Thus, there was considerable mobility in this sample.

Insert Tables 1a and 1b About Here

To test our exploratory research question about how stable the status orders are, we preformed a Kendall's tau-b correlation, which adjusts for ties (Abdi 2007) between the time 1 and time 2 status rank variables. Although significant (*p* < .01), the correlation was only .47, indicating substantial instability in the status orders of these groups.

We next conducted a between-subjects ANCOVA on individual performance with our time 2 high versus low status dummy variable along with the covariates (Table 2, Column 1). The results indicate that the performance of those who were in high status positions in their team in time 2 (*M* = 2.47, *s.d.* = 5.44) was significantly better than was that of people who were in low status positions (*M* = -.87, *s.d.* = 7.29, *p* < .05). This supports our first hypothesis.

To test our second hypothesis, we conducted another ANCOVA analysis adding our four-part status category variable to the model (Table 2, Column 2) and conducted post-hoc planned contrasts between the different categories. We found that status category had a marginally significant effect on performance (*p* = .06). In support of the hypothesis, planned contrasts, including our covariates, indicate that the performance of those who gained status (*M* = .24, *s.d.* = 6.92) was significantly lower than was that of the stable high status group members (*M* = 5.27, *s.d.* = 4.89, *p* < .05). Additionally, the performance of those who gained status was not significantly different than was that of either the stable low status members (*M* = -1.96, *s.d.* = 7.41) or status losers (*M* = -.67, *s.d.* = 6.50).

We were concerned that the different performance outcomes for those who gained status and stable high status members could be due to status seekers who were not in the top positions in their groups at time 2 bringing down the average performance level in that category. Thus, we ran a post-hoc ANCOVA analysis comparing the performance of those who attained the highest status positions in the groups at time 2 ($n = 13$; $M = -.12$, *s. d.* = 4.72) to those in the stable high status category. This performance difference was significant ($p < .01$) despite the small sample size.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Study 1 Discussion

The results of this study are quite counter-intuitive. First, despite the assumption and previous findings in the literature, we determined that there was quite a lot of individual status mobility in these groups and that the status orders, although significantly correlated over time, were not particularly stable. Second, although we found an expected relationship between one's time 2 status position in one's group and one's performance, *when* one attained high status mattered. Specifically, controlling for individuals' time 2 high versus low status, those who gained status performed significantly worse than did those who maintained high status positions in their groups over time. Even the status seekers who attained the top-ranked positions at time 2 performed worse than did the stable high group members. These results appear to be consistent with research suggesting that some individuals tradeoff efforts towards their task performance for status attainment in their groups.

An alternative interpretation for why status seekers' performance is no better than that of stable low status group members is that high status positions in these groups are not associated with resources that enhance *individual* performance. Instead, stable high status group members may have been conferred high status at the outset because they are good students, which is why their performance is higher. If this were the case, then status seekers are not positioning themselves in a way that would improve their individual performance. If the relationship between high status and individual performance is due to good students being conferred high status, then the relationship between their time 1 status position and performance should be the same for assignments at all points in time. If, however, the high status individuals are accumulating resources that benefit their individual performance, then we should observe a stronger relationship between time 1 high status and performance on later assignments than on earlier ones. We, thus, disaggregated our performance variable and examined the effect of time 1 status rank on performance on the first and on the last individual assignments of the quarter. We find a non-significant effect of time 1 high versus low status on the first individual assignment ($\beta = .29$, *n.s.*) and a significant effect of this variable on the last assignment ($\beta = .87$, $p < .05$), again controlling for gender, experience and satisfaction. These results suggest that, consistent with the extensive literature on the benefits of having high status, the individual performance of high status group members is, indeed, enhanced over time. Thus, we can tentatively rule out this alternative explanation for our findings.

Although the fairly small sample size makes this study's analyses conservative tests of our hypotheses, we want to replicate these results with a second, larger sample. We also want to determine who these individuals are and what they are doing that enhances their status over time but does not improve their performance. We, therefore, conducted a second study.

STUDY 2

Hypotheses

Our first objective is to replicate the effect from Study 1 that those who gain status do not perform as well as their time 2 status positions would indicate. Thus, we again hypothesize that controlling for time 2 status position:

Hypothesis 1: Status seekers do not perform as well as do those with stable high status in their groups.

We posit that the performance differences between stable high group members and those who gain status are due to proactive efforts individuals put towards seeking status. Status seekers may need to exert more effort towards status attainment that hurts their performance than stable high status members do because maintaining high status is easier than is gaining it over time (Loch et al. 2000). This begs the questions, then, who chooses to emphasize status enhancement over performance and what do they do to achieve higher status without improving their performance?

Who. We consider the personalities of status seekers compared to people in the other status categories. The Big Five personality dimensions are the most comprehensive and widely accepted taxonomy of personality traits (John & Srivastava 1999). The traits are: 1) Extraversion, or the degree to which an individual is gregarious, sociable and assertive versus quiet, reserved, and withdrawn; 2) Neuroticism (also referred to as emotional stability in the reverse), which is the extent to which individuals are anxious, insecure and worried versus calm, steady and self-confident; 3) Conscientiousness, or hard-working, organized and responsible versus impulsive, irresponsive and undependable; 4) Agreeableness, which is the degree to which individuals are sympathetic, cooperative and good-natured versus grumpy and unpleasant; and 5) Openness, or the extent to which an individual is imaginative, broad minded and curious versus concrete minded, practical and has narrow interests (Hogan, Curphy & Hogan 1994: 503-504).

Anderson et al. (2001) found that extraversion predicted status conferrals for both men and women and low neuroticism predicted status attributions for men. Hogan et al. (1994) reviewed research on personality predictors of emergent leadership in leaderless groups. They conclude that there is a fairly consistent association between high scores on the dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness and low neuroticism scores and being perceived as leader-like in a group with no appointed leader (p. 497).

To identify the personalities of status seekers, we interpret those findings to indicate that more neurotic, less extraverted and less agreeable individuals likely find themselves in low initial status positions in their groups. They would, therefore, have opportunities to potentially increase their status positions over time. Of these personality characteristics, research indicates that neuroticism might be the strongest motivator of status seeking behavior. Neurotic individuals are highly sensitive and reactive to negative feedback and stimuli (Eysenck & Eysenck 1985; Gray 1994; Rusting & Larsen 1998). Given that individuals are quite accurate at perceiving their actual status in groups (Anderson et al. 2006), we reasoned that if neurotics are attributed with low status by their peers in the initial status orders of their groups, this would qualify as negative feedback that would make them feel quite insecure about their status positions. These individuals, therefore, may be especially motivated to improve their status positions over time.

Hypothesis 2a: Status seekers will have higher neuroticism scores than will individuals in any of the other three status categories.

Furthermore, neuroticism is associated with poor performance (Barrick, Mount & Judge 2001; O'Connor & Paunonen 2007), which may explain why status seekers perform worse than their equally-ranked stable high status group members. Neuroticism's negative effects on performance have been related to cognitive processes that are consistent with our proposition regarding relative effort allocation. Specifically, Wallace and Newman (1997) suggest that neurotics are particularly susceptible to the automatic orienting of attention -- "any instance where attention and cognitive resources are redirected from an ongoing process to distracter stimuli" (p. 139 – 140). The so-called dysregulation process suggests that neurotics are easily distracted by non-task related, negative stimuli (Smillie, Yeo, Furnham & Jackson 2006: 140). We, therefore, posited that if neurotic individuals are more likely to be attributed with lower initial status than are less neurotic individuals, this acts as a negative distracter stimulus that might draw their attentional resources away from their task endeavors towards rectifying their perceived status underestimation. For individuals who have high status at time 2, we predict:

Hypothesis 2b: The status categories of status seekers and stable high members will mediate the negative effect of neuroticism on performance.

What. Next, we look for more direct evidence that the different allocation of neurotic individual's task versus status enhancing efforts distinguishes status seekers from high stable status members. The literature identifies two behaviors that may be associated with successfully enhancing one's status without benefitting one's individual performance: generosity and dominance.

As described earlier, Flynn and colleague's research indicates that increasing peers' perceptions of one's generosity is a means by which people gain status in their groups (Flynn 2003; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah & Ames 2006). Being perceived as generous towards the group, not just towards individuals, may also enhance status. Ridgeway (1982) demonstrated that low status members' influence attempts were considered more legitimate when the status seekers were perceived to have a cooperative, group-oriented motivation than a self-aggrandizement one. However, being too generous or overly oriented toward group goals could hurt individual's performance to the extent that it distracts from their own task efforts (Chen, Chen & Meindl 1998; Flynn 2003; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi & Yoon 1994). Although these studies do not measure the effects of generosity on *changes* in ones social status over time, it is plausible that individuals could increase their generosity as a way to gain higher status in existing peer relationships. We expect that neurotic individuals will, therefore, be more likely to increase their generosity over time in an effort to enhance their status and that those efforts will hurt their performance more than will stable high status members who only need to be generous enough to maintain their high status positions. For individuals who have high status at time 2, we predict:

Hypothesis 3: a) Neuroticism will positively predict generosity change over time, b) increased generosity will predict the likelihood that an individual gained status versus maintained stable high status, thus mediating the effect of neuroticism on the likelihood of being a status seeker versus a stable high status group member, and c) the negative effect of generosity change on performance will be mediated by the status seeker versus stable high status categories.

Another means by which individuals may gain status is by increasing their dominance behaviors (Lee & Ofshe 1981; Mazur 1985; Tiedens & Fragale 2003; Tiedens et al. 2007). Mazur (1985) finds that assertive speech and various non-verbal dominant behaviors are associated with high status and Lee and Ofshe (1981) determine that a target's dominance behaviors (e.g. acting confidently and assertively) are associated with larger awards in a fictional personal injury case. We posit that increasing one's dominance behavior may be an effective means of gaining status because it tends to produce complementary submissive responses, which enhance the counterparts' affective responses to the interaction (Dryer & Horowitz 1997; Tiedens & Fragale 2003). Furthermore, Tiedens et al. (2007) determined that people were motivated to perceive dominance complementarity when they wanted to coordinate with the other to succeed at their joint tasks. We, therefore, extrapolate from this finding that neurotic individuals may enhance their group status by increasing their dominance behaviors to convey confidence and assertiveness in a way that elicits complementary deferential responses from other group members.[1] Enhancing one's status in this manner may be most effective when the one conferring higher status is focused on optimizing their *group* tasks and, therefore, it will not encourage an exchange of resources that could benefit the status seeker's individual performance. For individuals who have high status at time 2, we predict:

Hypothesis 4: a) Neuroticism will positively predict dominance change over time, b) increased dominance will predict the likelihood that an individual gained status versus maintained stable high status, thus mediating the effect of neuroticism on the likelihood of being a status seeker versus a stable high status group member, and c) the negative effect of dominance change on performance will be mediated by the status seeker versus stable high status categories.

Methods

Sample. 235 individuals (161 men) from 44 teams from 4 – 6 people (*M* = 5.4, *s.d.* = .62) agreed to participate in the research project for a 90 percent response rate. They are 29.45 years old on average (*s.d.* = 3.68), 52 percent are Asian or South Asian and 37 percent are Caucasian. On average they have 73.65 months of post-graduate work experience (*s.d.* = 50.35).

Variables

Dependent variable. We used the same section mean-centered, aggregated individual performance measure as in Study 1. In this sample, the grade is based on two individual assignments (case write ups) worth 34 percent of the final grade, a final exam comprised of a case write up and short essay questions worth 25 percent of the final grade, completion of the time 1 and time 2 surveys worth 10 percent of the final grade and in-class participation from each class cumulatively worth 15 percent of the final grade. A group assignment that was worth 16 percent of the final grade is excluded from this variable.

Independent variables. We also constructed the status category variable the same way as in Study 1. In this sample, the ICC(1) of the peer ratings of contribution, influence and status were all greater than .19 in both time periods and the scale alphas at time 1 = .86 and time 2 = .91. Because many of our hypotheses are focused on the differences between status seekers and stable high status individuals, and in order to perform mediation analyses, we created a dummy variable called “status category seeker v. high” that equals one for the stable high status category. Analyses using the subsample of these individuals who are in the highest status rank positions at time 2 have a sample size of 49.

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[1] The way these individuals assert dominance matters, however. While the authors cited above operationalized dominance in terms of non-verbal behavior and assertive communication, other work has determined that *coercive*, threatening dominance behaviors do not effectively enhance one's status because such behaviors are considered illegitimate by other members of the group (Ridgeway & Diekema 1989; Ridgeway & Berger 1986). We will, therefore, operationalize dominance behaviors as non-coercive actions only.

Covariates. We again controlled for gender, experience and satisfaction as well as high versus low status at time 2, where relevant.

“Who” variables. We measured the Big Five personality dimensions using the 60-item NEO Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae 1992). All items are on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Examples of items from each scale are, “I am not a worrier” (reverse coded) for Neuroticism; “I like to have a lot of people around me” for Extraversion; “I don't like to waste my time daydreaming” (reverse coded) for Openness; “I try to be courteous to everyone I meet” for Agreeableness; and “I keep my belongings neat and clean” for Conscientiousness.

“What” variables. We measured perceived generosity with a peer-rated five-item scale from Flynn et al. (2006) using seven-point scales from 1 = Never to 7 = Always. Sample items are, “S/he is flexible and tries to accommodate others’ needs” and “S/he is unwilling to sacrifice his/her self-interest for the good of the team” (reverse coded). The ICC(1) at time 1 = .66 and at time 2 = .65. The time 1 scale alpha = .74 and the time 2 scale alpha =.87. Perceived dominance behavior was based on two items, “To what extent does each person on the team demonstrate a willingness to assert his/her ideas and opinions in the face of opposition and challenge?” and “To what extent does each person on the team convince and persuade others to see his/her perspective and ideas?” The ICC(1) at both time 1 and 2 = .27 and the scale alphas at time 1 and time 2 = .83. We centered each of the time 1 and time 2 variables around the team mean to eliminate between-team effects, and created change scores by subtracting the time 1 mean-centered peer rating from the time 2 mean-centered peer rating. Thus, we created “generosity change” and “dominance change” variables.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are provided in Table 3a and means and standard deviations across status categories are in Table 3b. Seventy-seven percent of status seekers started in the third through fifth spots in their group hierarchy at time 1 ($M = 4.07$, *s.d.* = 1.23) and 41 percent ended in the top position at time 2 ($M = 2.32$, *s.d.* = 1.17). We, again, explored the stability in the status orders between time 1 and time 2. The status orders were even less stable in this sample than they were in Study 1, with Kendall's tau-b = .36, $p < .01$.

Insert Tables 3a and 3b about here.

We next replicated our analyses from Study 1 to test Hypothesis 1 (Table 4, Column 1). The status category variable is significant ($p < .001$). Planned contrasts with covariates confirm that the performance of status seekers ($M = -.05$, *s.d.*= 3.92) is significantly worse than that of stable high status members ($M = 3.09$, *s.d.*= 2.73, $p < .001$). While the seekers' performance is not significantly different than that of status losers ($M = .34$, *s.d.*= 4.49, *n.s.*), the performance of stable low status members is significantly worse than is that of the status seekers ($M = -1.27$, *s.d.*= 4.45, $p < .05$). An ANCOVA comparing just status seekers who achieved the highest status positions in their groups at time 2 ($M = -.74$, *s.d.*= 4.12) to stable high status members produced the same statistically significant pattern of results, ($p < .001$) (Table 4, Column 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Given the lack of significant effects from any of our covariates, we excluded them from our subsequent analyses on the smaller sample of only those in the top ranked positions in time 2 (Becker 2005).

Insert Table 4 about here

To test our "who" hypotheses, we first regressed the Big Five personality traits on time 1 status rank. As expected, we found that neuroticism positively predicts status rank (that is, more neurotic individuals were ranked *lower* in the initial hierarchies) ($\beta = .51$, *s.e.* = .17, $p < .01$). We next conducted between-subjects ANOVA predicting neuroticism and determined that our four-part status category variable is significant ($p < .05$). Planned contrasts confirmed that the mean level of neuroticism among status seekers ($M = 2.32$, *s.d.* = .56) is significantly higher than that of stable high ($M = 1.96$, *s.d.* = .47) and status losers ($M = 2.05$, *s.d.* = .59, both contrast $p < .01$) and marginally significantly higher than that of stable low status members ($M = 2.14$, *s.d.* = .74, $p = .08$). These results support Hypothesis 2a. We also confirmed that the neuroticism of status seekers who attained the top-ranked positions in their groups at time 2 is significantly higher than that of stable high group members ($M = 2.26$, *s.d.* = .54, $p < .05$[2]).

We next followed the steps from Baron and Kenny (1986) to test our mediation hypotheses. As shown in Figure 1, we determined that neuroticism's effect on individual performance is fully mediated by status category seekers v. high, supporting Hypothesis 2b[3].

Insert Figure 1 about here

To test Hypotheses 3a and 4a, we regressed neuroticism on generosity change and dominance change. The effect of neuroticism was significantly positive on both variables ($\beta_{\text{generosity change}} = .16$, *s.e.* = .09, $p < .05$ and $\beta_{\text{dominance change}} = .36$, *s.e.* = .12, $p < .001$). Results of logistic regression analyses predicting status category seekers v. high support both Hypotheses 3b, that generosity change, and 4b, that dominance change, fully mediate the effects of neuroticism on the likelihood of being a status seeker versus a stable high status group member (Figure 2). Thus, the increased generosity and dominance of neurotic individuals explains what status seekers are doing to attain their higher status positions that is different from those who maintain those positions all along.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Last, to test Hypotheses 3c and 4c, we first regressed generosity change and dominance change on individual performance. Although both coefficients were negative, only dominance change exerted a significant effect on individual performance ($\beta_{\text{dominance change}} = -1.85$, *s.e.* = 1.07, $p < .05$; $\beta_{\text{generosity change}} = -2.23$, *s.e.* = 1.59, $p = .08$[4]). With status category seekers v. high in the model, the effect of dominance change on performance drops in size and significance ($\beta_{.} = -.25$, *s.e.* = 1.10, $p = .41$) while the effect of the status category variable remains significant ($\beta = 3.71$, *s.e.* = 1.16, $p < .001$) indicating full mediation. Hypotheses 4c, therefore, is supported.

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[2] Given the strong directionality of our hypotheses, we report one-tailed significance tests for analyses using this small sample. This path in the mediation analyses has a 2-tailed p-value of .07.

[3] Since we perform a logistic regression to test effects on status category seekers v. high, we cannot perform Sobel tests.

[4] Based on Flynn (2003), we also checked for a curvilinear effect by adding a squared dominance change term to this analysis and it was not significant.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 replicates our counter-intuitive findings from Study 1 that individuals seem to trade off their performance for status attainment in their groups. Furthermore, we determined that neuroticism is associated with lower status attributions in initial status orders and is positively associated with the likelihood of gaining status over time. The negative effect of neuroticism on performance is explained by the efforts exerted to attain status versus those needed to maintain it. Those efforts include increasing one’s generosity and dominance behaviors in the group. Both behavioral increases hurt, or at least do not improve individual performance. Thus, neurotic individuals are engaging in actions that enhance their status attributions at the cost of their own performance.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from these studies contribute to social-psychological research on status attainment in groups. By focusing on the dynamics of status order evolution over time, we found that the strong assumption that one’s positions in the legitimated time 2 status order predicts performance regardless of when that position was attained is unfounded. Gaining status over time does not boost one’s performance at all; nor does losing status appear to substantially hurt one’s performance.

Although it is possible that we did not observe a performance effect of gaining status due to a lag between the attainment of a high status position and the conferral of benefits that might enhance performance, any longer term potential benefit for the status seekers in these groups is irrelevant. Since the groups were disbanded after the academic quarter in which they were studied, the individuals who worked to attain higher status positions could not expect payoffs for their efforts in the future. Thus, the motivation to invest in status attainment over time occurs despite no apparent instrumental performance benefits of achieving even the highest status positions. This result is consistent with Huberman et al.’s (2004) finding that individuals trade off material value for status opportunities.

A strength of this research is that we used real individual performance rather than perceived or rated performance. One way to interpret these results is that status seekers are effectively conveying more task competence (as determined by the “contribution” component of our status measure) than they actually have. We might not see the status enhancement-performance tradeoff in a task environment where performance is ambiguous or subjectively determined by those who are influenced by the status seekers' portrayals of their own abilities. Future research should explore this possibility.

An additional contribution of our studies is the determination of a specific personality profile of status seekers that is quite different from that of individuals who are conferred high status by their peers in emergent status orders (Anderson et al. 2001; Hogan et al. 1994). Although we found that neuroticism was negatively associated with time 1 status ranking, it was *positively* related to the likelihood of being a status seeker. Consistent with the findings of Smillie, et al. (2006), when neurotics focused on correcting their initial status underestimation, they were quite successful at the task. This provides a cognitive explanation for why individuals may allocate more effort towards status attainment than individual performance.

We also identified two behaviors, increasing generosity and dominance, that further support the effort tradeoff interpretation of our performance results. The neurotic individuals increased these behaviors more than less neurotic ones did in successful efforts to gain status in their groups. Since these behaviors either hurt or did not help their individual performance, compared to those who maintained high status all along, the status seekers put relatively more effort towards status enhancing activities than performance enhancing ones. We, thus, conclude that high status that is attained over time does not benefit individual performance as much as does having the same high level of status all along because more effort is required to gain status than to maintain it, and this effort distracts from one's own performance.

Limitations

Of course, there are limitations to these studies. First, although there were many benefits to using student teams, future research should examine if these results persist outside a business school setting, where all the individuals have fairly high status aspirations (Pfeffer & Fong 2004). A related limitation is that, since the surveys were conducted with pedagogical objectives as well as research ones, the students received feedback about their perceived leadership between the time 1 and time 2 surveys (they did not receive feedback on their status, influence and contribution ratings). This information could have influenced students' status seeking behavior – particularly that of students who measured high in trait neuroticism and received feedback that they were perceived as having weak leadership skills. Although this is a legitimate critique, Anderson, et al. (2006) demonstrated that people's impressions of their status positions are quite accurate even without feedback. In addition, when we compare individuals' time 1 self-ratings to those of their peers, status seekers do not have more inflated self-perceptions of their status at time 1 than do people in other status categories. So while the feedback may have heightened the effects we observed, we do not believe it dramatically changed the status dynamics of these groups.

Third, since we measured performance as students' aggregated grade from assignments they completed over time, it is possible that this masked the performance benefits of gaining status. If someone's status increased only towards the end of the quarter, for instance, their performance on early assignments would not reflect their higher status in the group. We had to balance this possibility against the quality of a single performance measure (i.e., their final exam), which is a noisy measure of true performance due to variations in how well students take tests and measure-to-measure performance fluctuations. When we conduct our analyses using just the last case assignment and final exam grades, we find that the results in our Study 1 sample are consistent with our results using the full performance measure (status category p =.05; status category seekers v. high $p < .001$), but that neither of the status category variables are significant in the Study 2 sample. Thus, we cannot rule out some measurement error in our results. We hope these limitations encourage more research on dynamic status processes.

Conclusions

The results of these studies suggest caution when trying to achieve high status ambitions. Instead of working to gain higher status over time, individuals are better served by trying to convey competence during a group's initial interactions because it will be much easier to maintain an initial high status position than to try to climb the social ladder later on.

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Table 1a: Study 1 descriptive statistics and correlations (N = 96). Means and (standard deviations) or N reported on diagonal.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1) Performance	0.00 (6.98)				
2) TIME 2 High/low status	.21*	High = 28[5]			
3) Experience	.06	.01	81.63 (39.99)		
4) Team satisfaction	.19+	-.08	.05	5.96 (1.15)	
5) Gender	-.11	-.14	-.28**	.07	Male = 66

+ = p < .10 * = p < .05 ** = p < .01

Table 1b: Mean individual performance across status categories

Status Category	*Performance*
Stable High (N = 12)	5.27 (4.89)
Status Seekers (N = 31) / Time 2 top-ranked (N = 13)	.24 (6.92) / - .12 (4.72)
Status Losers (N = 26)	-.67 (6.50)
Stable Low (N = 27)	-1.97 (7.41)

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[5] There are more than 24 individuals who are ranked 1 in their groups at time 2 due to ranking ties.

Table 2: Study 1 ANCOVA results (Eta-squared (F-values) reported).

Variables	Column 1	Column 2
Time 2 High/low status	.05 (4.65)*	.00 (0.11)
Experience	.01 (1.01)	.02 (1.64)
Team satisfaction	.04 (4.53)*	.06 (6.15)*
Gender	.00 (0.70)	.00 (0.61)
Status Category		.07 (2.53) +
Model	(2.63)*	(2.66) *

+ = p < .10 * = p <.05 ** = p < .01

Table 3a: Study 2 descriptive statistics and correlations (N = 235). Means and (standard deviations) or N reported on diagonal.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Performance	0.00 (4.31)											
2. Status-Time2	-.32**	Hi = 49										
3. Experience	.08	.08	73.65 (50.35)									
4. Team Satisfaction	.10	.04	.09	5.85 (.145)								
5. Gender	-.00	.11	-.11^{+}	-.06	Male = 161							
6. Generosity Change	.07	-.23**	.06	.07	-.02	0.00 (.389)						
7. Dominance Change	.11	-.39**	-.06	-.04	-.02	.27**	0.00 (.508)					
8. Neuroticism	-.14*	.02	.00	.04	.15*	.16*	.15*	2.15 (.630)				
9. Extraversion	.15*	.01	-.01	.15*	.05	.13*	-.01	.26**	3.65 (.708)			
10. Openness	.13*	-.08	.00	.11^{+}	.06	.20**	.06	.30**	.69**	3.47 (.725)		
11. Agreeableness	.08	.02	-.03	.16*	.17**	.18**	.07	.35**	.67*	.61**	3.63 (.702)	
12. Conscientiousness	.02	-.01	-.03	.15*	.14*	.19**	.06	.29**	.70**	.56**	.66**	3.95 (.756)

+ = p < .10 * = p < .05 ** = p < .01

Table 3b: Means and standard deviations of dependent and mediator variables across status categories

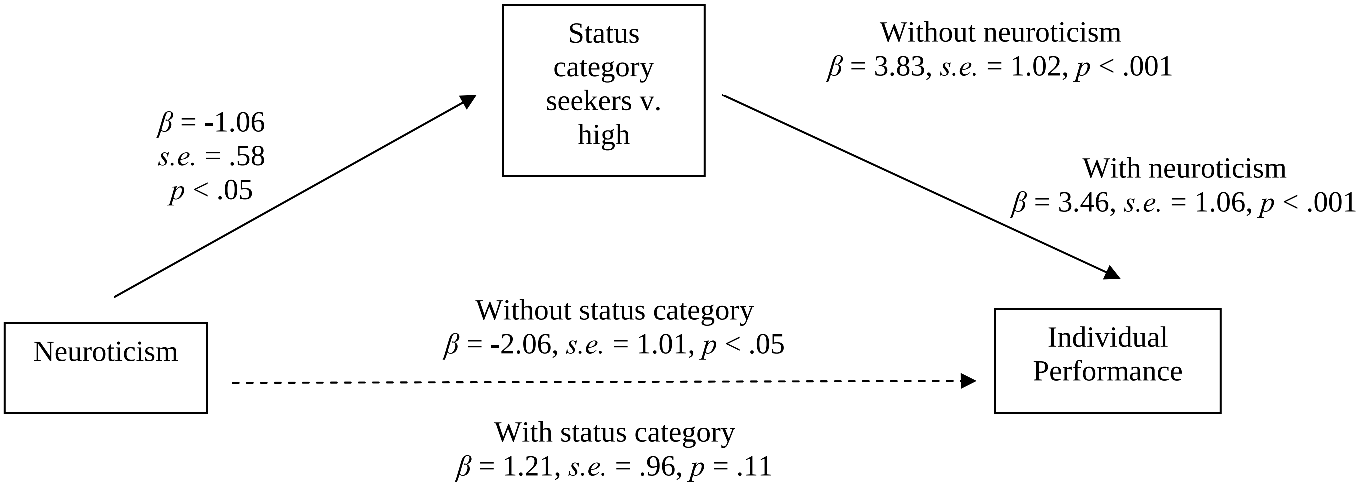
Status Category	*Performance*	*Neuroticism*	*Generosity Change*	*Dominance Change*
Stable High (N = 22)	3.09 (2.73)	1.96 (.47)	- .04 (.36)	- .02 (.49)
Status Seekers (N = 73) / Time 2 top-ranked (N = 27)	- .05(3.92) / - .74 (4.12)	2.32 (.56) / 2.26 (.59)	.12 (.32) / .21 (.32)	.35 (.40) / .46 (.47)
Status Losers (N = 71)	.34 (4.49)	2.05 (.59)	- .08 (.43)	- .25 (.44)
Stable Low (N = 70)	-1.27 (4.44)	2.14 (.74)	- .03 (.40)	- .11 (.48)

Table 4: Study 2 ANCOVA of Status Category on Individual Performance (Eta-squared (F-values) reported)

Variables	Column 1 (N =235)	Column 2 (N = 49)
TIME 2 High/low status	.00 (1.10)	
Experience	.01 (0.46)	.00 (0.20)
Team satisfaction	.00 (3.57)	.01 (0.53)
Gender	.00 (0.09)	.00 (0.00)
Status Category	.07 (3.57) ***	
Status category seekers v. high		.22 (12.73)***
Model	(3.62)***	(3.50)**

* = p <.05 ** = p < .01 *** = p < .001

Figure 1: Mediation of neuroticism's effect on individual performance by status category seekers v. high, N = 49.[6]


Status category seekers v. high
Without neuroticism
$\beta = 3.83$, $s.e. = 1.02$, $p < .001$
$\beta = -1.06$
$s.e. = .58$
$p < .05$
With neuroticism
$\beta = 3.46$, $s.e. = 1.06$, $p < .001$
Without status category
$\beta = -2.06$, $s.e. = 1.01$, $p < .05$
Neuroticism
Individual Performance
With status category
$\beta = 1.21$, $s.e. = .96$, $p = .11$

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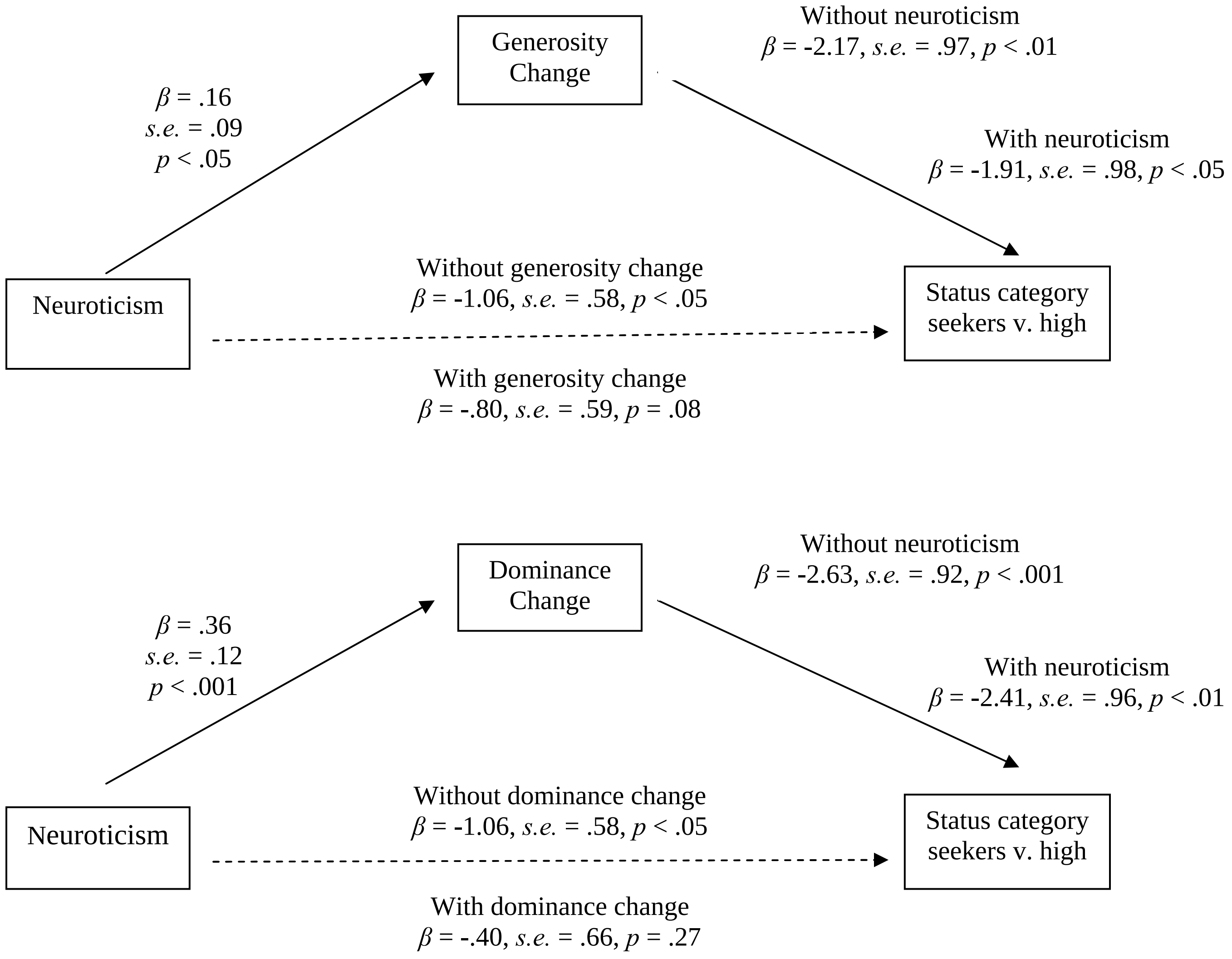
[6] One-tailed p-values reported.

Figure 2: Mediation of neuroticism's effect on status category seekers v. high by a) generosity change and b) dominance change (N = 49).[7]


Generosity Change
Without neuroticism
$\beta = -2.17$, $s.e. = .97$, $p < .01$
$\beta = .16$
$s.e. = .09$
$p < .05$
With neuroticism
$\beta = -1.91$, $s.e. = .98$, $p < .05$
Without generosity change
$\beta = -1.06$, $s.e. = .58$, $p < .05$
Neuroticism
Status category seekers v. high
With generosity change
$\beta = -.80$, $s.e. = .59$, $p = .08$
Dominance Change
Without neuroticism
$\beta = -2.63$, $s.e. = .92$, $p < .001$
$\beta = .36$
$s.e. = .12$
$p < .001$
With neuroticism
$\beta = -2.41$, $s.e. = .96$, $p < .01$
Without dominance change
$\beta = -1.06$, $s.e. = .58$, $p < .05$
Neuroticism
Status category seekers v. high
With dominance change
$\beta = -.40$, $s.e. = .66$, $p = .27$

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[7] One-tailed p-values reported.