

High status leads to increased happiness—sometimes

May 9 2024, by Tom Fleischman



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Is it worth the effort to seek high status in a group or setting for which a person has no real passion? New Cornell research suggests the answer is "no."

"In talking to friends and colleagues, I would ask them about where they stand in their groups and how they feel about it," said Angus Hildreth, assistant professor of management and organizations at the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management, in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business.

"I'd ask them if it mattered, and they'd always ask, 'Matter for what?'" he said. "And I'd say, 'For your happiness,' and I'd always get back that it depends."

The dependent factor, Hildreth contends, is the level of importance a particular group holds for a person—say, the difference between being a team leader in a job you're not exactly thrilled with, versus being the captain of your rec league soccer team.

"You usually belong to more than one group, and some of those groups matter a lot more to you than others," said Hildreth, whose paper, "In the Pursuit of Happiness: Attaining a Greater Number of High-status Positions Increases Well-being But Only in Select Groups," [appears](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Hildreth tested his theory in 10 experiments involving 3,554 participants, and found that attaining a greater number of high-status positions generally increased one's well-being, but only in groups that were central or relevant to a person's identity. Holding high status in important groups increased well-being, he found, because such positions bolstered individuals' self-esteem and increased their sense of acceptance in those groups; but not because such positions bolstered their sense of power and control, he found.

Conversely, well-being was not positively correlated to status in unimportant groups, no matter how that status was measured.

"The more I researched this, I discovered that maybe we can differentiate groups according to how intrinsically important they are to you," Hildreth said. "That's a bit of a subjective idea. There's quite a bit of research looking at how we identify in our groups, and that we can identify more with some groups than others. And then the question becomes, to what extent does the importance of your groups—and your standing in those groups—matter?"

Hildreth's first five studies explored the relationship between status and well-being in the participants' current groups. In the first study, 309 participants were asked to identify all the groups they belonged to, rate their status in those groups, their current well-being, the importance of each group and various personality and demographic measures.

Status in those groups was positively correlated to well-being; what's more, the proportion and number of groups in which participants enjoyed high status was significantly positively related to well-being. Similarly, average or low status in groups was related to lower well-being.

In Study 2 (plus three conceptual replications), Hildreth randomly assigned 2,156 workers to different experimental conditions in which the status they held in two groups (important vs. unimportant) was manipulated. He found that well-being was significantly higher for those in the important-group condition than in the unimportant-group condition.

Study 3 employed a longitudinal design, with participants reporting their status and well-being at two instances, a year apart. The participants were 212 college sophomores who listed all their face-to-face groups at the university, indicated their status in each group and its subjective importance to them. At both times, the participants' status in their important groups was positively correlated to greater well-being.

The fact that the participants didn't view a sense of power in those groups as being important to them was unexpected, Hildreth said.

"Your standing in your group is often associated with your power," he said, "and that's not to say that high status doesn't increase your sense of control and influence. It's that even if it does, that doesn't make you happy."

One theory: With greater influence and power comes greater responsibility, Hildreth said, and for some, that might be unappetizing.

Future work will address the idea of having low status in an important group, and whether one's participation in that group—or their view of the group as "important"—would change over time.

"Would you just subjectively reconstruct how important that group is?" he said. "It's like, 'Yeah, I happen not to enjoy much [status](#) at work. Well, work's not that important to me anyway, so that's OK.'"

More information: John Angus D. Hildreth, In the pursuit of happiness: Attaining a greater number of high-status positions increases well-being but only in select groups, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104622](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104622)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: High status leads to increased happiness—sometimes (2024, May 9) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-high-status-happiness.html>

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