We work harder against lesser rivals, new study shows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- People will work harder -- about 30 percent harder -- against members of a lower status group because the prospect of losing to those we want to keep below us poses threats we don't want to face, according to a new Cornell study.

"One of the main dimensions of comparison between groups is status, and performance can affect this status," said Cornell doctoral student Nathan Pettit, who conducted several experiments with co-author Robert Lount of Ohio State University that are published in the January issue of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. "We asked, under what conditions are people going to work more or less hard, given differences in status between the in-group and comparison out-group?"

Pettit and Lount told Cornell students (the in-group) they would compete against students from various other universities. "In reality, there was no competition," said Pettit, a management and organizations student in the Johnson School. "The set-up of the study was such that participants were led to believe their performance would be compared to a student at another institution."

The researchers assumed that when compared to a higher status out-group, the students would work harder. But after varying the status of the groups that students were compared to and measuring how much effort they put forth, the researchers found, to their surprise, that the Cornell students worked harder against lower status out-groups.

"My co-author and I had actually hypothesized the opposite effect," Pettit said.

The reason, Pettit said, is pretty logical. "Imagine you enter a situation where your group is going to be compared against another group. If Cornell students' performance is compared against a higher-status group, even though you might want to beat them, there isn't necessarily a strong expectation that you will do so. The cost of being defeated is minimal and therefore does not increase motivation above baseline. However, if you're compared to a lower-status out-group, the arrangement of the social hierarchy would dictate that you should win. If you perform poorly, that can be damaging to Cornell's standing among other institutions, as well as to your personal standing within the group. People strongly want to avoid this outcome."

Students were told whom they were up against and shown other university's logo on their materials. They performed simple tasks -- for instance, canceling out vowels in random strings of letters -- because of the strong link between measurable performance and effort.

"Even though we observed that people work harder when compared to lower status out-group members, in comparison to higher status or similar status out-group members, we don't claim this is going to generalize to all types of tasks or for all out-group comparisons," Pettit said. "It may only hold for simple tasks, or for comparison groups that are only slightly higher or lower in status, like the ones we chose."

In the end, while being outperformed by someone in a higher status group might be painful, it does not threaten us so badly. But being beaten by someone in a lower status out-group "goes against the expectations for that comparison," threatening both the status of our group among other groups, and our status as an in-group member in good standing, Pettit said.

The study has implications for managers and coaches, Pettit said: "The social costs of being outperformed by a lower status group may be significant. Further highlighting these costs could be a motivating force and way to incite gains in effort."

Provided by Cornell University
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