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Divided by Status: Upward Envy and Downward Scorn¹

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Americans stand at a dramatically divisive point in our history, separated by inequalities not seen since the Gilded Age a century ago. Although received wisdom claims that we all are middle class, polls persistently show that we split equally between identifying as working class and as middle class. To paraphrase Tom Lehrer, the middle folks scorn the working folks and the working folks envy the middle folks; they both hate the rich folks and the poor folks; it's as American as apple pie. Not to be glib, we are divided by social class in ways that we rarely acknowledge. My social psychology laboratory has been examining the ways that envy upward and scorn downward undermine us. Much of the theoretical ground-work appears in my book *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*.² Envy and scorn reflect comparison. Envy may be defined as “I wish I had what you do (and I would like to take it away from you).” Scorn may be defined as “You are not worth my attention (and I wish you would go away).” Envy famously eats at the envious, linked with resentful rumination. It's not too good for the envied, either, because they may be targets of violence. Likewise, scorn scars the scornful because it makes them clueless about the people they ignore, becoming socially inept in relationships. And being scorned, of course, is no one's preference. If envy and scorn are so toxic, how do they poison us?

This article will begin with background on the conceptual framework that informs our exploration, the Stereotype Content Model. Then I will sample three studies from our team's empirical examinations: one on status, and one each on scorn and envy. All is not bleak, however, because envy and scorn can change under the right circumstances.

The Contents of Our Stereotypes

The Stereotype Content Model³ describes our first reactions to strangers, either individuals (e.g., in a dark alley) or groups (e.g., a new wave of immigrants). First, we need to know the other's intentions for good or ill, whether the other is friend or foe. If friend, then the other individual or group is warm, trustworthy, and friendly. (If foe, then not.) Second, we need to know whether the other can act on those intentions, that is, whether the other is competent, capable, and effective (or not). A competent foe is dangerous, but an incompetent foe can be safely ignored. A competent friend can help, whereas an incompetent friend needs help.

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) turns out to be remarkably useful in describing both society's shared map of social groups and individuals' impressions of other people. In technical terms, the two dimensions – perceived warmth and competence – account for upward of 80 percent of the variance in cultural stereotypes and individual impressions.⁴ Examining each quadrant of the warmth×competence, two-dimensional map illustrates why.

In the low-low part of the space (see table 1) are those with allegedly no redeeming qualities, seen as neither warm nor competent. All over the world, poor people land in this part of the space, and in the U.S., homeless people and drug addicts do, too. People report feeling disgust and contempt toward them. In direct contrast, the groups viewed as high on both dimensions are us, in-groups, and societal reference groups for most Americans, such as the middle class and heterosexuals, and, in the U.S. especially, Christians. People report feeling proud of these groups. These kinds of us-them comparisons (e.g., middle-class people versus homeless people) have been the stuff of decades of research on intergroup relations.⁵

The off-diagonal quadrants represent our lab's unique contribution; they contain the ambivalently viewed outgroups. Groups viewed as high on warmth but low on competence, for example, include older people and those with disabilities, either physical or mental. All over the world, people agree that these people are nice but incompetent. People report feeling pity and sympathy toward them, but these emotions are intrinsically ambivalent and, though well-intentioned, look down on the person.

The other ambivalent quadrant contains rich people and entrepreneurs, seen as competent but cold, all over the world. People report envy toward them, another ambivalent emotion because, although it admires, it may seek to bring down. The Stereotype Content Model has been validated in a U.S. representative sample survey and by replications with groups in three dozen societies.⁶ The warmth x competence map apparently captures some human universals.

Within this two-dimensional space, distinct societal structures predict each dimension. Perceived cooperation or competition predicts perceived warmth. Those on our side (ingroups, allies, but also pitied groups) share good intentions, in contrast with those competing against us. (Poor people exploit the system one way, by allegedly not working hard; rich people exploit the system another way, by taking unfair advantage. Both are resented.) The cooperation = warmth finding also replicates across samples.

This paper focuses on the other dimension, namely, the surprising finding that perceived status predicts perceived competence to an astonishing degree (correlations on the order of .8). People all over the world believe that people get the social class they deserve. Supposedly, people who are competent get rich, and people who are incompetent stay poor. This is surprising because it makes no allowance for circumstance – lucky or unlucky – and it appears although one measure is demographic (status: Do they have economic success and prestigious jobs?) and the other is a personal trait (ability). This striking link between perceived status and perceived competence forms the basis of our current puzzle.

People Value People by Their Status

We decided to take this status question into our social neuroscience laboratory.⁷ We hypothesized that people value others according to their status, especially the most extreme, us versus them. Overall, this pits the right column of table 1 (high status/competence) against the middle column (low status/competence), and particularly the top right corner (us) against the bottom left corner (them).

A classic dilemma from moral philosophy proved useful here. Suppose Joe is standing on a footbridge spanning a trolley track. An out-of-control streetcar speeds underneath Joe, and will kill five people down the track. Next to Joe is a bystander who, if pushed onto the track, will stop the trolley and save the five people, but who will die in the sacrifice. Assume Joe cannot jump to sacrifice himself, and assume he chooses to sacrifice the one to save the five. Is this morally acceptable? Most people (80–90 percent) say no.⁸

We used the trolley dilemma as a vehicle for assessing people's judged value. We rotated every combination of the four SCM social group/types onto the footbridge and into the five on the tracks, using two social groups as exemplars of each quadrant (this makes sixteen combinations in all; the five were always homogeneously from one group). Participants rated how acceptable each sacrifice-one-to-save-five action would be. They also provided neuro-imaging data because they performed the whole task inside an fMRI scanner. We used the brain scans to detect whether the choice engaged complex decision making networks, or whether it was made more impulsively.

For simple high-low status comparisons, two-thirds of the time, people did indeed choose to sacrifice one low-status bystander more often than a high-status one, regardless of who was on the tracks. And even more often, three-quarters of the time, participants chose to save high-status people more than low-status people on the tracks, regardless of whom they had to sacrifice.

Besides these two overall effects of status on being sacrificed or saved, one unique combination stood out from the other fifteen: sacrificing one low-status (low-competence) person, who was also low on warmth (e.g., an apparently homeless or drug-addicted person) to save five high-status (high-competence) people, who were also warm (e.g., apparently middle-class or American). People found that tradeoff (one low-low for five high-high) to be morally acceptable a full 84 percent of the time, thereby reversing the baseline (unspecified people on the bridge and on the tracks).

We then examined this unique condition in the brain-imaging data, to track the network previous studies have implicated in complex social decisions. This network (involving orbital frontal cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, and precuneus) correlated with the extent to which the participant did end up overriding what would normally be a morally unacceptable choice. This fits the idea that people were not making this decision casually. Nevertheless, they were still valuing some lives over others, on the basis of status. Next we turn separately to scorn down and envy up.

Scorn Downward

Focusing on disgust, contempt, and disdain toward lower-status people, scorn denies the other's full humanity. Another of our neuro-imaging studies used fMRI to examine people's reactions to extreme outgroups, the low-status, low-warmth drug addicts and homeless people.⁹ We drew on a reliable finding in the young science of neurosocial cognition: Essentially every time people think about other people, see a photograph of a person, or consider another's mind, an area in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) activates. This area correlates with people's efforts to form impressions of other people's mental states. We

hypothesized that most social groups, including pitied and envied ones, would likewise activate this area, but that perhaps the disgusting low-low outgroups would not, because people do not want to (or need to) consider the minds of homeless or drug-addicted people.

Indeed, the most extreme, disgusting outgroups, the lowest of the low, did not significantly activate the mPFC, whereas other outgroups (pitied or envied) and the ingroup did. This failure to activate the brain's usual social cognition apparatus is consistent with dehumanizing these apparently homeless or drug-addicted people. Indeed, in a replication outside the scanner, participants rated it as harder to consider those extreme outgroups as having a mind, and as more difficult to imagine a day in their lives. They were also rated as less warm/familiar, and less competent/autonomous, consistent with our SCM. These ratings come across as dehumanizing these extreme outgroups, a scorn reaction if ever there was one.

Scorn Can Change

All is not lost; we need not automatically fail to take account of the humanity of allegedly disgusting social groups. People can consider another person's mind just by simple interventions that take no more than a moment. In a follow-up study, which we consider the "soup-kitchen intervention," participants saw a photograph of a vegetable before each photograph of a homeless person or a drug addict.¹⁰ Half the time, they had to consider whether the pictured person would like that vegetable, a simple mental inference. (Half the time they had to ignore the vegetable.) Even this trivial degree of mind-reading brought the humanizing mPFC back on line for these typically disgusting outgroups.

Scorn can change for other outcasts as well. Undocumented immigrants ("illegals," "aliens") normally rank down with homeless people.¹¹ But when people are asked to empathize with an immigrant, to imagine the person's feelings and experiences, they see the person as warmer, and thus less scorned.¹² This works only for people who report that they can easily put themselves into the perspective of fictional characters in general, but still it represents a step away from dehumanizing another.

As an alternative in motivating people to consider another person's mind, being on the same team helps. When the immigrant is framed as part of a group that comes here to work hard, growing the American economy, paying taxes, and under-using social services – that is, cooperating with the ingroup – then people see the immigrant as warmer. Again, this works best for people who can put themselves in the shoes of fictional others, but only if they also are nudged to view immigrants in general as cooperative. Although this does not make the immigrant part of the ingroup (only three generations will do that), pity is better than disgust. Along with considering the other's mind and empathizing, being on the same team seems salutary.

Envy Upward

Changing now from looking down to looking up, we have also shown people envying others just because of their group memberships. Recall that envy involves wishing one had what the other has (with maybe a touch of wishing the other did not have it). Envy relates to

jealousy and resentment, fueled by a feeling of injustice. Envy targets rich people, entrepreneurs, and elites. Further, envy is dangerous because it implies that one might wish the other ill. Indeed, we hypothesized that people might especially rejoice in the misfortunes of high-status people.¹³

In a study showing that people resent those of high status, participants saw photographs of individuals from the four SCM quadrants, including, of course, envied outgroups such as investment bankers (before the recession). Each picture was paired with an everyday event that was positive (“ate a really good sandwich”) or negative (“got soaked by a taxi driving through a puddle”). They rated how good or bad they felt about the event happening to the pictured person. People felt systematically worse about bad events happening to everyone, except the envied people, and they felt systematically better about the good events happening to everyone, except the envied people. That is, they felt less good about good events, and less bad about bad events, when they happened to investment bankers and their ilk.

What’s more, when we hooked participants up to facial electrodes, the electromyography (EEG) recorded their tendency to smile when bad events happened to envied people. For all other groups, people smiled more about their good events than about their bad events, but for the rich, people smiled more about their bad events than their good events. This seems to us a demonstration of Schadenfreude, whether participants like to admit it or not.

Envy Can Change

Once again, we sought a more optimistic alternative, and we did find that people can empathize, even with investment bankers, even during the Great Recession. If participants read a sympathetic news story about an out-of-work investment banker who, for example, commutes to Starbucks every day so his neighbors will not know he is unemployed – a pity intervention – participants then report less Schadenfreude toward other investment bankers in general. Other effective interventions include an article describing all the bankers’ post-crash pro-bono work with small businesses (a pride intervention) or an article claiming that most spent their bonuses on cocaine (a disgust intervention that, while hardly positive, took them out of the envy quadrant, making them unworthy even of Schadenfreude).

Theoretically, envy can evaporate in the warmth of shared teamwork, when one feels the envied other is part of one’s own tribe. Relatedly, people can feel what the Dutch call benign envy, that is, inspiration, for someone doing slightly better, if that enviable other serves as a role model for how to strive for the same results.

Getting beyond Comparison

Comparison up and down the status hierarchy is common and probably inevitable.¹⁴ Even dogs and primates know the social hierarchy and react accordingly. Without understanding these status comparison processes, we cannot get beyond them. Yet people are incredibly flexible, even at the neural level, so we are optimistic about getting people beyond comparison, at least sometimes.

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Table 1

Stereotype content model: Schematic of two fundamental dimensions

	Low competence = <i>Low status</i>	High competence = <i>High status</i>
High warmth	Older, disabled Pity	Ingroup, allies, reference groups Pride
Low warmth	Poor, homeless, immigrants Disgust	Rich, professionals Envy

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