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Rule Violations Not Checked if Low Status

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Synonyms

Cheating; Dominance theory; Rules violations; Status

Definition

The idea that individuals of low standing in a social hierarchy do not check for or remember rule violations of relatively higher status individuals.

Introduction

The development of social exchanges, such as cooperation and reciprocity, is typically seen to be dependent, in part, on the ability to detect and remember the violation of social contracts. In this regard, it is crucial to be able to discover and identify cheaters, those who (intentionally) violate social contracts. Importantly, by their very nature social exchanges and cheating operate within social systems created by social species. Like many social species, ours has developed a social hierarchy wherein some members hold higher standing than others. In this context, it has been suggested that lower status individuals are less likely to detect, remember, and penalize cheaters of relatively higher status (Cummins 1999). Evidence in support of this claim is presented as well as results from recent studies which call this account into question. In addition, the definition of social status in humans is explored, providing ways of further clarifying the role of status in cheater detection. Finally, the ability of lower status individuals to enforce social rules is explored as a potentially important variable to consider when exploring social status and cheater detection in humans.

Low-Status Individuals and Cheaters

In nonhuman animals, there is a wealth of literature supporting the idea that lower status individuals are less likely to detect, or at least penalize, cheating in higher status individuals. In humans however, empirical data are sparse. Indeed, it appears that the oft cited Cummins' (1999) is the only published work to empirically, and directly, investigate this effect in humans (although see Fiddick and Cummins 2001 for discussion of conceptually similar studies demonstrating mixed results). In this work, Cummins, using the Wason Card Selection Task, had participants test compliance with a college dormitory role (i.e., if

T.K. Shackelford, V.A. Weekes-Shackelford (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_2636-1

someone is assigned to tutor a study session, that person is required to tape record the session), with relative status manipulated via four groups:

High-Status: Subjects engage the task as a high-status individual (Resident Assistant) checking on lower status individuals (Students).

Low-Status: Subjects engage the task as a Student checking on Resident Assistants.

High-Status Equal: Subjects engage the task as a Resident Assistant checking on fellow Resident Assistants.

Low-Status Equal: Subjects engage the task as a Student checking on fellow Students.

In the first experiment, participants were simply placed into one of the four groups and their actions were tallied. Here, Cummins found that participants in the high-status group used a cheater detection strategy about 65 % of the time. In contrast, those in the remaining conditions, including the low-status condition, used a cheater detection strategy only 15–20 % of the time. In other words, low-status individuals were unlikely to engage in detection of cheaters when checking on higher status individuals, at least relative to high-status individuals checking on those of lower status. In the second experiment, Cummins employed the same task but had participants answer from both a high- and low-status position, with the order reversed for half the sample and a distraction task between perspectives. In this version of the task, participants starting from the low-status position used a cheater detection strategy 41 % of the time, which increased significantly to 65 % after switching to the high-status position. In contrast, 50 % of participants used a detection strategy when starting from the high-Status position, with this dropping a nonsignificant amount to 40 % after switching to the lower status position. Like the first experiment, these results were taken to indicate that lower status individuals were less likely to detect cheaters of higher status.

In contrast to Cummins investigation, which directly evaluated the impact of social status on cheater detection, most investigations into this effect use tasks focused on whether individuals can remember the faces of cheaters. In these tasks, participants are typically presented with pictures of people faces along with descriptions of cheating, trustworthy, or neutral behaviors. Then, after a predetermined time interval, usually ranging from a few minutes to a week, participant's memory is tested, with the key idea being that individuals using a cheater detection strategy should have better memory for cheaters' faces. When social status is manipulated in these tasks, it is typically done via the job title given in the character descriptions (e.g., low-status job: baseball game vendor, high-status job: bishop). The most well-cited study using this technique is Mealey et al. (1996), which found, after a week-long interval, better memory for *low-status* cheaters in comparison to high-status or noncheaters. These results mirror Cummins' and can be seen as providing evidence that low-status individuals are less likely to attend to or remember cheating by relatively higher-status individuals.

Despite being widely cited, however, recent investigations have noted areas of concern and have failed to replicated Mealey and colleague's results (there do not appear to be published attempts to replicate Cummins findings). Specifically, Barclay and Lalumière (2006) note that the cheating behavior in Mealey et al.'s stimuli includes instances of more threatening or physically dangerous behaviors, such as robbery and child molestation, which may make cheaters easier to remember compared to cooperators. In a similar vein, Mehl and Buchner (2008) note that the behavior and character descriptions used in Mealey et al. were not fully reported and that those descriptions that were reported differed in length and amount of detail which may make some easier to remember. Moreover, six experiments across three studies (i.e., experiments 1 and 2 in Barclay and Lalumière 2006; experiments 1, 2, and 3 in Mehl and Buchner 2008; and experiment 4 in Buchner et al. 2009) have failed to replicated Mealey et al.'s results regarding status, despite also investing the impact of potentially confounding variables such as sex of participant, sex of the face used in the stimuli, attractiveness and likability of the faces used, and time interval

between initial display of the stimuli and memory testing (experiment 3 in Mehl and Buchner 2008 did find better memory for faces associated with high-status professions but there was no interaction with cheating or trustworthy behavior). The data from each of these suggest, in contrast to Mealey and Cummins results, that status does not impact detection or memory of cheaters, and thus, that low-status individuals are just as likely to detect and remember high-status cheaters.

Complexities in Cheater Detection, Defining Status, and Enforcing Rules

Current data are equivocal as to whether social status has a meaningful impact on cheater detection in humans. In contrast, a wealth of data suggest that there are other individual and situational variables that may impact cheater detection. For example, Chiappe et al. (2004) found that participants saw it as subjectively more important to remember cheaters compared to cooperators, that this effect was greater when larger amounts of resources were involved, and that subjects were more likely to remember cheaters. In turn, Barclay (2008) demonstrated that the rarity of behavior may play a crucial role in detection and memory by showing that people tend to remember whatever behavior is rarest, regardless of whether that behavior is cheating or cooperating. In this context, it is important to note that to-date, studies specifically looking at the impact of social status on cheater detection have manipulated relative status via descriptions of occupation or income. In contrast to this, literature and research on social status in humans indicates that social hierarchy is determined by a variety of connected, yet independent, constructs, such as power, socioeconomic status, dominance, prestige, influence, and leadership (Blader and Chen 2014). Furthermore, while social status is often seen as a dispositional characteristic, it is also highly situational, such that someone may be of high status in one environment (e.g., friend group or family) but low status in another (e.g., occupation). In this regard, the constructs used to measure status so far have been relatively narrow and are unable to speak to the broad definition of status in humans.

Moreover, there is typically an important caveat to the idea that low-status individuals should be less likely to notice, remember, and penalize social rule violations by individuals of relatively higher status. Specifically, this should occur to the extent that there is no advantage to detecting cheaters of higher status (Cummins 1999). This situation is believed to appear when lower-status individuals are unable to force high-status individuals to follow social rules. In many nonhuman animals, this appears to be the case. There are reasons to believe, however, that in humans this represents only a subset of possible situations. Specifically, in humans, there are many mechanisms that can be used to enforce social rules, regardless of status. For example, contracts, laws, and courts provide sanctioned and thus official methods of enforcing social rules. Outside of official channels, gossip, exclusion, and public media (e.g., news, social media) provide broader avenues for compelling or penalizing individuals or groups. Of course, an argument can be made that these mechanisms may be more accessible or effective for individuals of higher status. At the same time, it is clear from grassroots campaigns and social movements that lower-status individual's, broadly defined, can also leverage these mechanisms to coerce and punish those of higher status. Regardless of these specifics, research in humans is currently unable to fully explicate the role of status-based rule enforcement in the relationship between social status and cheater detection.

Conclusion

Evidence to-date is equivocal as to whether lower-status individuals are less likely to detect, remember, and penalize rule violations from higher-status individuals. However, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that cheater detection is moderated by a host of individual and situational variables. In this respect, investigations into the impact of status have relied on relatively narrow conceptualizations of human status and have not

explicitly explored the role of status-based rule enforcement. Future research can clarify the influence of status on cheater detection through boarder investigation into the numerous ways social status is determined in human hierarchies and by considering the role status plays in enforcing social rules.

Cross-References

- Higher Status in Group
- Rule Violation
- Rule Violations Checked if High Status
- Social Contract Rule Violation
- Social Reasoning Affected by Rank (Mealey, Daood, Krage, 1996)
- Status and Dominance Hierarchies
- Status Competition
- Status of Cheater

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