UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF STATUS INEQUALITY:

WHY IS IT EVERYWHERE? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Abstract

Status, which is based on differences in esteem and honor, is an ancient and universal form of inequality which nevertheless interpenetrates modern institutions and organizations. Given its ubiquity and significance, we need to better understand the basic nature of status as a form of inequality. I argue that status hierarches are a cultural invention to organize and manage social relations in a fundamental human condition: cooperative interdependence to achieve valued goals with nested competitive interdependence to maximize individual outcomes in the effort. I consider this claim in relation to both evolutionary arguments and empirical evidence. Evidence suggests that the cultural schema of status is two-fold, consisting of a deeply learned basic norm of status allocation and a set of more explicit, variable, and changing common knowledge status beliefs that people draw on to coordinate judgments about who or what is more deserving of higher status. The cultural nature of status allows people to spread it widely to social phenomena (e.g., firms in a business field) well beyond its origins in interpersonal hierarchies. In particular, I argue, the association of status with social difference groups (e.g., race, gender, class-as-culture) gives inequalities based on those difference groups an autonomous, independent capacity to reproduce themselves through interpersonal status processes.

Understanding the Nature of Status Inequality: Why is it Everywhere? Why Does it Matter?

Most social scientists are familiar with Max Weber's famous delineation of resources, power, and status as distinct bases of inequality in modern societies. Control over resources, including money, and access to positions of power in organizations that produce and distribute resources are closely related processes that provide the material representation of inequality in society. Social status is rather different. Status is based on differences in esteem, honor, and respect. It is an apparently ancient and universal form of inequality that nevertheless interpenetrates modern institutions and organizations (Van Vught and Tybur 2016). We see status literally everywhere, not only in evaluative rankings of individuals but also in rankings of the significant groups we are associated with and the objects we surround ourselves with.

Despite its ubiquity, status is often treated as side topic by social scientists interested in inequality, both because it is a little different in nature than the material processes of power and resources and because it is often assumed to be less consequential for life outcomes. I've argued (2014) that the relative failure to take status seriously is a major mistake if we want to understand how inequality actually works in a contemporary society like the U. S.

At the micro-level, we will never understand the fundamental human motivations that enter into the struggle for precedence that lies behind inequality if we don't take into account how much people care about their sense of being *valued*, relative to others, by the groups and communities to which they belong—this is status. Organizational behavior scholar, Cameron Anderson, and his colleagues (2015) recently concluded, based on an extensive review of social science evidence, that the desire for status is a fundamental human motive which affects not only short term but long term well-being and even health, motivates a wide range of behavior, and is

apparent across all human cultures. In keeping with this, research shows that feeling

disrespected in a social relation is powerful trigger for anger and even aggression (Anderson et

al. 2015). If you doubt the importance of status for people's behavior, consider the recent U. S.

presidential election. There is plausible evidence to suggest that at least some of the anger that

fueled support for Trump among white working class and white "heartland" voters stemmed

from the symbolic status insult these people felt as a result of the increasing cultural hegemony

of "urban elites" and changing racial and gender dynamics (Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016).

At a more macro-level, status is important because it plays a powerful role in

constructing and reproducing inequality based on membership in social difference groups, such

as gender, race and class-as-culture. In fact, I've argued that it is status that gives systems of

inequality based on social differences like gender and race an autonomous, independent capacity

to reproduce themselves—that is to reproduce themselves on the basis of race and gender itself,

not just on the basis of average group differences in control of power and resources. This

process occurs through *status beliefs* which I will say much more about later. But for now, my

point is that given its power and importance, we need to better understand the basic nature of

status as fundamental form of inequality. And in particular, we need to understand how the

nature of status inequality allows status to spread virtually everywhere is society.

What I want to do here today is to make a case-via argument and and a sprinkling of

evidence-for what I claim status is at root and for what the implications of that are.   I argue that

status hierarchies are a *human cultural invention* to manage social situations that are

characterized by cooperative interdependence to achieve valued goals and competitive

interdependence to maximize individual outcomes. Status is everywhere partly because these

situations are fundamental to the human condition.

People have to cooperate with others to get most of what they want and need in life from the basics of survival to what it takes to make them happy. But this deep cooperative interdependence has nested within it an inherent competitive tension. When people coordinate their efforts, questions necessarily arise about the terms on which their relationship will be conducted and how the spoils of their joint efforts will be divided. Who will be the center of attention? According to whose will and judgments will joint actions be determined and what costs must each endure? Everybody has an unavoidable interest in forming cooperative endeavors but everybody also has an interest in maximizing what they get from those endeavors. I argue that status is, at root, a socio-cultural schema or blueprint for organizing social relations in order to manage this basic tension and produce collective outcomes.

The social theorist, William Sewell (1992), has argued that social structures have a dual nature, consisting on the one hand of a cultural schema for enacting the structure and, on the other hand, of the material distribution of behaviors and resources that result from that enactment. The cultural schema of status is a structural schema in this sense. It is a set of deeply learned, taken for granted cultural rules that people use to organize their behavior with others in a manner that produces a status hierarchy—that is, a behavioral ranking in esteem demonstrated though deference, prominence and, typically, influence over collective decisions. As people draw on the familiar, if implicit, cultural schema of status to organize the many shared endeavors that they engage in through their relationships with others, status pervades social life from the interpersonal to the organizational.

My argument so far leads to 2 more questions. First, of course, if status is a cultural schema of behavioral rules, what are the rules? But second, isn't it a controversial claim to say that status is cultural in nature, given arguments about the evolutionary roots of dominance and

hierarchy among higher primates, plausibly including people (Chang and Tracy 2014; Van Vught and Tybur 2016)? What is the evidence that status is a set of common knowledge normative rules shared as group culture? I will start by briefly considering the evolutionary question because it creates a foundation for considering the "what are the rules" question. After that I'll turn to some modest evidence in support of the clam that there are shared rules of status. Rules, of course, can be recognized not only through their enactment but their enforcement. Finally, but importantly, I'll address how the nature of status as a cultural schema lies behind its role in reproducing inequality based on social difference groups.

Evolved Hierarchy or Cultural Schema?

There is a long tradition of arguing that rank ordered deference relations among humans are an evolutionary residue of our primate heritage and, beneath it all, based on *dominance*, which is control through threat of force (Chang and Tracy 2014; Mazur 2005).   Basically, dominance is, "I'm scarier than you so defer." But, while dominance does occur, there is a great deal of evidence that in many, perhaps most, rank order relations among people, precedence is given freely, say through esteem, rather than taken by threat (Anderson and Willer 2014). For instance, why did people defer to Steven Hawking in his wheelchair? To accommodate this evidence, evolutionary theorists have more recently posited that people have also evolved a second source of deference relations, based on *prestige* (Heinrich and Gil-White 2001). The idea is that we have evolved a response to offer esteem to others with superior "information goods" because this increases our chance of getting closer to them and learning their superior skills and information. Based on these arguments, Chang and Tracy (2014) argue that everyday status relations are merely a joint product of evolved dominance and prestige responses.

But I argue that there is a key flaw here. All evolutionary arguments are about the establishment of dyadic ranks based on individual differences among the contestants. But how are these dyadic ranks assembled into a shared hierarchy in a group of three or more, as most goal-oriented human groups are?   A long tradition of research by Ivan Chase and his colleagues, using experiments and other evidence, has shown that even in simple animals like fish, individual differences, while predictive, cannot fully account for the hierarchies that emerge in groups larger than a dyad. Chase points to contingent behavior processes among three or more individuals as the final determinative factor (Chase 1980; Chase and Lindquist 2016).

This means that the formation of hierarchies in groups of three or more has a substantial element of contingency that depends on social dynamics among the larger group of individuals. I argue that the sensitivity of hierarchy formation to contingent dynamics creates a critical social space in which cultural norms for status and deference can emerge. In simple dyads one person may reflexively defer to another based on admiration or fear, but in a larger group, she may react differently. And even if she does not react differently, the ultimate consequences of her deference for the hierarchy will depend on the contingent reactions of other members.

The contingent looseness in hierarchy formation creates the opportunity for the emergence of norms regulating patterns of deference and status. But it is the interdependent interests of group members in who ends up high status that actually motivates the emergence of norms. Under goal interdependence, who ends up high status in the group affects all our interests. As a result, whatever status we egoistically desire for ourselves, we want *others* in the group to defer to *others* who appear most able and willing to contribute to the collective effort since this will maximize success and the shared benefits that flow from that (Ridgeway and Diekema 1989).   This means we are likely to pressure others to defer on the basis of expected

value to the group. But the consequence is that, by the same token, we will be faced with pressure from others to defer on this basis ourselves. In this way, as Horne (2004) has shown, such an interdependence of exchange interests gives rise to group norms that members enforce. Here it creates implicit *norms for deference on the basis of perceived value to the group's goal efforts*.

A Normative Schema for Status Allocation

There is overwhelming evidence that interpersonal status hierarchies grant deference and influence to group members in proportion to their *perceived value* to the collective effort (Anderson and Willer 2014; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Magee and Galinsky 2008). This is what I call the *Basic Norm* of status, which I argue is deeply learned, taken for granted cultural knowledge for most people. The norm is a means by which the group exercises some control over a would-be dominator who threatens to take over the group without contributing to the shared endeavor. In a study of status among MBA students, Anderson and colleagues (2006) showed that students who tried to claim higher status than their peers felt was justified by their value to the team were isolated and disliked. In an earlier study of my own, I found that when a group member attempted to seize influence through dominance that was not backed up by competence, other members turned on the dominator and rejected him or her (Ridgeway and Diekema 1989). In other words, people enforce the Basic Status Norm with sanctions against violators and do so spontaneously.

But the Basic Status norm manages dominators through carrots as well as sticks. By offering esteem and influence for expected contributions to the group effort, the norm incentivizes dominators and others to funnel their energetic assertiveness and aspirations into the best efforts they can offer on the group's behalf (Willer 2009; Anderson and Willer 2014). In

addition to managing the dominator, by granting influence over group decisions in proportion to the perceived value of members' contributions, the basic status norm also provides a system for weighing and combining individual contributions into a collective line of action which is an aid to goal attainment. For this reason, Anderson and Willer (2014) argue that interpersonal status hierarchies are a boundedly functional organizational solution to the problems of cooperative interdependence to achieve shared goals. Functionality is "bounded" because status is granted for *perceived* value and perceptions can be biased or strategically manipulated.

I argue, however, that the Basic Status norm is not all there is to the cultural schema of status. The expectation the norm creates for deference to others on the basis of perceived value to the group immediately confronts the individual member with a second question. How can she figure out what her fellow members will take to be the signs of greater or lesser value to the group? In western societies, by the way, value to the group is typically understood as perceived goal related *competence* along with effort (Anderson and Willer 2014; Berger and Webster 2006). I argue that people solve this coordination problem by developing shared cultural *status beliefs* about the attributes and behaviors that indicate higher or lower levels of status worthiness and types of competence. A lot of the action in status as a form of inequality is in these shared status beliefs.

Experiments I have conducted show that people form shared status beliefs about the indicators of worthiness and competence quite easily (Ridgeway et al. 2009). Other evidence shows that such beliefs are widespread in U. S. culture. Research shows that status beliefs form central elements in the widely held cultural stereotypes of all the major groups by which inequality is patterned in the U.S., including race, gender, class, education, and occupation (Fiske et al. 2002; Cuddy et al. 2007). We also have status beliefs linking assertive, agentic behavior

with greater status and competence (Conway, Pizzamiglio, and Mount 1996. These same studies show that status beliefs are recognized by people as "common knowledge" in that they are presumed to be the beliefs of "most people" (Fiske 2011). In that way, status beliefs serve as ready bases for coordinating judgments of value to the group (Chwe 2001).

I'm arguing, then, that our cultural schema for status is two-fold. We have a taken for granted but fundamental basic status norm that we learn from experience and pass on to others through our behavior. We combine this deeper, more implicit normative rule with a more explicit, variable, and historically changing set of shared cultural status beliefs that we use to anticipate what others will see as "better," more competent, and valuable in various situations. We can think of the basic status norm as the social grammar of status and status beliefs as its vocabulary. It is through the combination of a shared basic status norm and shared status beliefs that people are able to quickly form status hierarchies in the real time of interaction, as evidence shows they do. Because status hierarchies work through a combination of status beliefs, which are typically shared at the macro-level of a broader community or society, and an application of those beliefs at the micro-level of social relations among actors, status is inherently a multi-level form of inequality.

Some Modest Evidence

Ok, so I am arguing status is, at root, a cultural schema that we use to enact status hierarchies in situations in which we are cooperatively interdependent with others to achieve valued outcomes. It may be laid on evolutionary residues but it is not reducible to them. So what's the evidence for this? I've already cited a couple of studies that show people acting as though they are following a cultural rule in status relations by sanctioning group members who

break the rule. Here's a little more supportive data from a recent experiment of mine (Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2017).

In this experiment, which was conducted for another purpose, a lower status member of a work team disagrees with a higher status member's task choice. The basic status norm says that in this situation the lower status member, who is presumed to be less competent, should agree to defer to the presumably more competent higher status member's views. Ok, in the study, two higher status participants are asked how they would view the low status member in this situation if the low status member either agreed to go along the higher status member's choice for the group decision (deferred as expected) or stuck to his or her own opinion (resisted). In one case, the disagreement is with the *other* high status member of the team. In the second case it is with *self*. If the participants are following a *norm* for status, of course they should react with greater approval for deference than resistance. But crucially, they should react with *similarly greater* approval for deference to the *other* high status member as for deference to self. Here's the results for defer/resistance to the Other and for the self (Figs 2 & 3 from Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2017—see powerpoint slides at end of this paper).

As you can see, participants' positive versus negative views of the low status member were substantively same in both cases and only slightly more extreme in the more ego-centered situation of deference to self. This suggests that they were indeed following a cultural norm in approving of the low status member for deferring as expected, rather than just repaying the low status member for direct deference to self.

Ok, what about evidence for the second part of the cultural schema of status—that actors draw on cultural status beliefs to make coordinated judgments about who is "better." For this, I point to the several decades of research investigating the so called *status generalization process*

(Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Berger and Webster 2006). This is the well documented process by which widely held beliefs about the status and competence associated with individuals' broad group identities like race and gender systematically and *similarly* bias other actors' and often their own perceptions of their competence and performance within local, goal-oriented group situations.

Implications of a Cultural Schema of Status

Even if status relations are rooted in a cultural and normative schema, why does that matter? It matters because, as Sewell (1992) pointed out, a cultural schema or blueprint for organizing social relations in a certain way can be applied permissively to new situations and phenomena beyond the contexts of its origins. Because of its cultural nature, people can apply status as a way of coordinating with others in regard to a broad range of social phenomena well beyond the interpersonal group. Espeland and Sauder (2016), for instance, have studied how status rankings of law schools develop and become consequential points of reference for both schools and students alike. My colleagues, Shelley Correll and Ezra Zuckerman, and I have a recent paper in which we show how, when people must make a decision whose success depends in some degree on the reactions of others, they draw on beliefs about the status of various options to make a choice that will coordinate well with the likely reactions of others (Correll et al. 2017). Unfortunately, this can mean that even if a decision maker thinks, say, that the woman candidate for police chief is as or slightly better than the male candidate, the decision-maker may still favor the male candidate as easier to "sell" to others. If status is merely an evolved dyadic rank response, the very broad reach of status rankings in advanced industrial societies is much harder to explain.

Reproducing Inequality Based on Social Difference

Now I would like return to my point that one of the most important consequences of status as a form of inequality is that it gives inequalities based on social differences like gender, race, or class-as-culture an autonomous, independent capacity to reproduce themselves. This argument turns on the status belief part of the cultural schema of status. A series of studies I have done on how people form status beliefs in the first place suggests that interpersonal status hierarchies can create experiences that transform people's beliefs about mere difference, say reds versus blues, into shared beliefs that people in one group (the blues) are not only different, but more competent and esteemed than those in the other group (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000; Ridgeway et al. 2009). In these studies, the indicator that shared status beliefs have formed is that even those in the group that ends up low status develop beliefs that "most people" would see the typical member of other group as more respected, higher status, and more competent than the typical member of their own group.

Interpersonal status hierarchies, in other words, can actually create and spread status beliefs about social differences. Particularly insidious is the way that experiences in interpersonal hierarchies can transform a resource or power advantage possessed by people in one group compared to another into a status advantage by fostering cultural beliefs that people in the advantaged group are not only richer and more powerful, but would also be viewed by "most people" as more respected, competent and worthy of esteem.

If you are rich and powerful, why does it matter if you are also high status because of your group identity? It matters because status gives you an *additional* advantage that works even in relation to members of the lower status group who are just as rich and powerful as you are. As I've mentioned, when there are status beliefs about a group difference and they become salient for actors in a social setting, they systematically bias the perceived competence and status

worthiness of the actors associated with those group identities. In a business meeting or a job interview or in an encounter between a patient and doctor, for instance, actors from status advantaged groups like whites or men are presumed to be a little more competent and appropriate for leadership than are otherwise similar actors from status disadvantaged groups like people of color or women. As a result, a woman in a similar position with similar pay as a man may still be slightly disadvantaged compared to him for a promotion by the implicit, status based presumption that she is not quite as broadly competent and worthy of leadership as he is. Note that the advantage that gender status beliefs give the man is not based on his individual attributes but on his *group identity* as a man. This is the beginning of how status beliefs give inequality based in group identity an autonomous capacity to reproduce itself.

While the extent of this group based bias in expectations can be large, it is often small in any given encounter. But the effects of these small biases accumulate over multiple encounters in all the different organizational and institutional settings that are consequential for inequality. The effect is to systematically direct actors from status advantaged groups towards positions in society with greater resources and power than those that flow to actors from status disadvantaged groups and to do so in a way that justifies the outcome on the basis of "merit."

Biasing perceptions of competence and suitability for leadership is the primary way that status beliefs about social differences give those differences an autonomous capacity to reproduce inequality based on group membership alone. However, it is not the only way that status beliefs act at the social relational level to reproduce difference based inequality. Status beliefs about social differences also bias who people favor for associations and exchange, which creates network disadvantages for lower status actors (Ridgeway 2014). Finally, status beliefs create resistance or "backlash" reactions to behaviors from the low status members that

challenge the status hierarchy based on that difference (Bobo 1999; Rudman et al 2012). I have argued that gender inequality, in particular, persists in the modern world, in the face of counterforces, primarily through the effects of gender status beliefs acting in these ways on everyday social relations (Ridgeway 2011).

As this suggests, it is the biasing effect of macro-level status beliefs about group differences on everyday micro level status hierarchies that make such hierarchies more than mere random noise in broader inequality processes. Because of status beliefs, interpersonal hierarchies independently enacted over diverse but consequential goal oriented contexts take on systematically similar shapes in terms of the categories of people who end up more or less advantaged within them and revealed as "better." To the extent that status beliefs about group differences create a corresponding hierarchy, that hierarchy provides its participants with a vivid, apparently valid demonstration of the greater apparent competence and worthiness of those from high status difference groups. This, in turn, reinforces the cultural status beliefs. In this way, status beliefs are key to the way that actor-level status evaluations of who is "better" act as a mechanism that interweaves inequality based on group differences into modern "meritocratic" organizations of resources and power.

There is a second, also important, way that status beliefs about social differences reproduce inequality based on difference that is an indirect effect of their biasing effects on social relational processes. Thus far, I have discussed status beliefs at the macro-cultural level and status hierarchies at the interpersonal, social relational level. This second effect works at the meso-level of organizations. It is well documented that assumptions about the attributes and superiority of dominant groups are often embedded in the structures, practices, and procedures by which workplace, educational, government and other organizations carry out their work

(Acker 1990; Baron et al. 2002; Stevens, Fryberg, and Markus 2012). Once such gender, race, or class biased organizational procedures develop, they tend to persist though inertia and act as independent factors in the continued production of unequal outcomes in the organization for those of different genders, races, and class backgrounds.

But how do assumptions about the nature and superiority of dominant groups become embedded in organizational structures and practices in the first place? New structures and procedures are typically developed at the social relational level by committees, teams, or small groups of founders who are confronted with problems of organizing their work. I argue that status beliefs about social differences are likely to shape what goes on in these social relational groups, affecting whose voices are heard and whose interests are heeded as procedures and structures are designed. The effect is to inscribe assumptions about the greater competence and status worthiness of people from some groups compared to others in to the very structure of the way the organization does its work. The biasing effects of gender status processes at the social relational level, for instance, have been clearly documented in the historical origins of several widely used job classification systems that have the effect of paying men's jobs better than women's (Nelson and Bridges 1999). I suspect that similar status biased processes could be found in the origins of race and class biased organizational practices and procedures.

Conclusion

Ok, I've taken you on a rather wild ride in this talk, from dominance hierarchies to cultural schemas to the reproduction of inequalities based on social difference groups. But I hope I have convinced you that we ignore status inequality at our peril. It may be an ancient and deeply rooted form of inequality but it is nevertheless cultural in nature and, therefore, not beyond our control.   In this it is like language, which has evolutionary roots but is still a cultural

construction that varies and changes. If we want to create more egalitarian societies, especially societies in which social differences like race or gender are no longer powerful, independent determinants of unequal life outcomes, then we must take into account status processes. Status is a multi-level process that works its effects primarily through everyday social relations in implicit ways that people rarely notice. It acts as something like a hidden hand that reproduces inequality based on social difference. While we may never undo status altogether as a form inequality, we can undo its most pernicious effects by undermining status beliefs based on major social difference groups. As cultural beliefs, status beliefs have to be widely held in a population to have effect and that consensuality and apparent validity can be disrupted by changing material circumstances and persistent social effort. Social change is possible, but won't happen without sustained effort.

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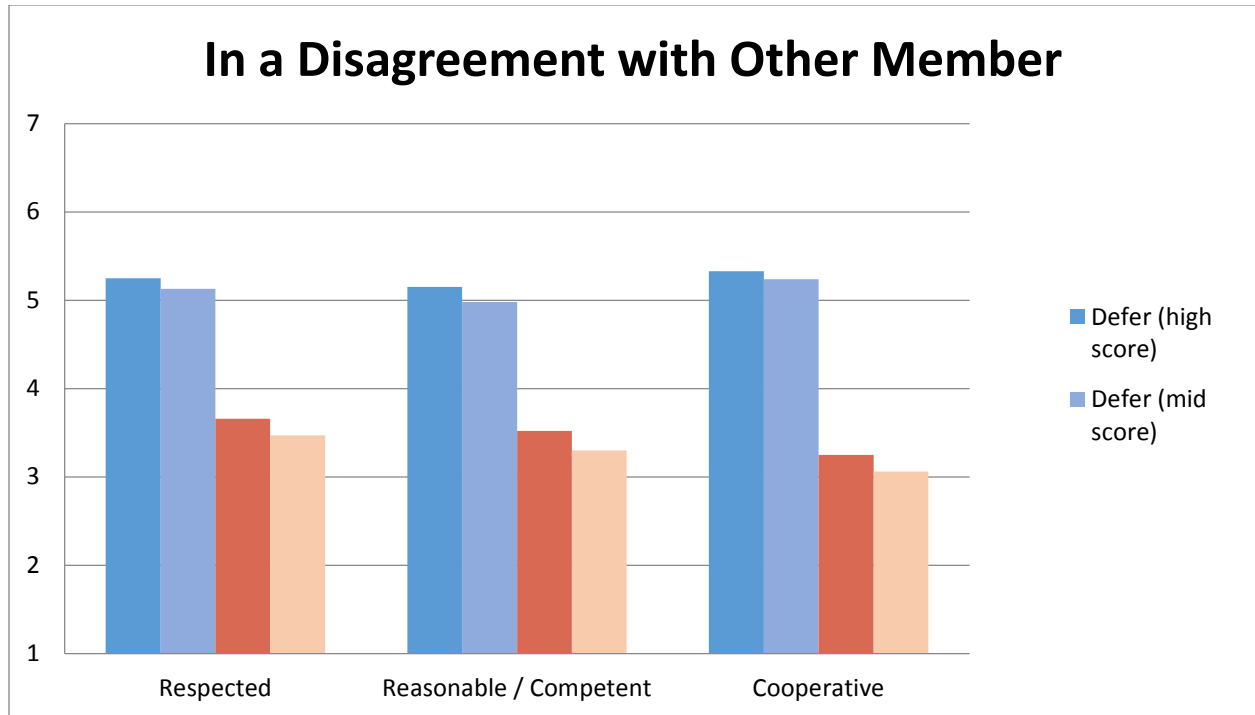Students." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102:1178-1197.

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"How you would see X (Low Scorer)?"

"How you would see X (Low Scorer)?"

In a Disagreement with Self

Categories: Respected, Reasonable / Competent, Cooperative

Legend:
- Defer (high score)
- Defer (mid score)
- Resist (high score)