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How hierarchy shapes our emotional lives: effects of power and status on emotional experience, expression, and responsiveness[☆]

Gerben A van Kleef and Jens Lange

Hierarchy is a defining characteristic of social life that profoundly shapes human psychology. Here, we draw attention to the pervasive impact of social rank on emotional processes. We review the effects of rank (power and status) on emotional experience, expression, and responsiveness. Our review indicates that (1) lower-ranking individuals experience more negative emotions, whereas higher-ranking individuals experience more positive emotions; (2) lower-ranking individuals adapt their emotional expressions to the social context, whereas higher-ranking individuals express their feelings more freely; (3) lower-ranking individuals accurately perceive and respond to the emotional expressions of others, whereas higher-ranking individuals do so only when others' emotions are self-relevant. Finally, (4) power and status have very similar effects on emotional processes, suggesting opportunities for theoretical integration.

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Introduction

To enable life in groups, many social species developed systems of hierarchical differentiation that help establish coordination, avert anarchy, and prevent or manage conflict [1,2]. An extensive body of research has illuminated the myriad psychological effects of hierarchy. Although early writings emphasized possible implications of hierarchy for emotions [3], the predominant focus in later work has been

on the consequences of hierarchy for cognition and behavior [e.g. Ref. 4, for exceptions, see Refs. 1,5]. Here we review the underemphasized yet pervasive consequences of hierarchy for emotional dynamics.

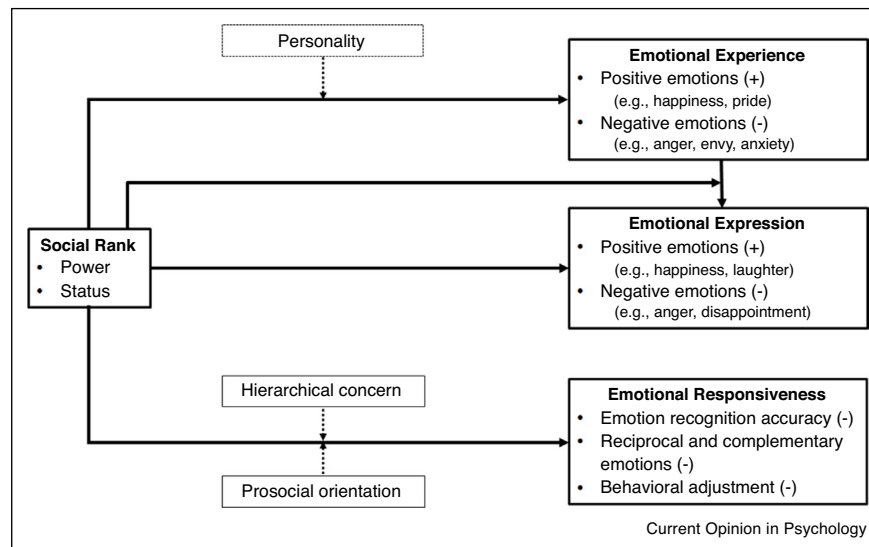
Emotions are valenced responses to situations that entail synchronized patterns of appraisals, experiences, physiological changes, expressions, and/or behavioral tendencies [6]. At the intrapersonal level, the emotions people experience enable them to respond to pertinent events by shaping cognition and behavior [7]. At the interpersonal level, the emotions people express contribute to social coordination by eliciting affective, inferential, and behavioral responses in others [8]. Through these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, emotions exert a profound impact on our individual and social lives [9–11]. All of these emotional dynamics are modulated by social hierarchy.

Social hierarchy refers to an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension, with power and status being the two most important dimensions of hierarchical differentiation [2]. Power is defined as asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations [3,12,13], whereas status is defined as the respect and admiration a person receives from others [14,15]. Although power and status can in principle vary orthogonally [16], they are typically confounded. For instance, leaders tend to have a degree of power as well as a degree of status.

To illuminate how hierarchy shapes emotional dynamics, we review research on the consequences of power and status for both intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of emotions. That is, we document effects on emotional experience, emotional expression, and emotional responsiveness (see Figure 1). In doing so, we limit ourselves to the effects of individuals' current rank in social hierarchies in terms of power or status, or proxies thereof. Thus, we do not cover research on dominance and prestige, which are typically seen as strategies for *attaining* social rank [17,18]; for a review of this literature, see [19]. To paint a fine-grained picture, where possible we specify effects at the level of *discrete* emotions (e.g. happiness, pride, anger, shame, envy) rather than more general

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Figure 1



Schematic representation of key effects of social rank (operationalized as power or status differentials) on emotional experience, emotional expression, and emotional responsiveness. + denotes processes that are stronger for higher-ranking individuals, and – denotes processes that are stronger for lower-ranking individuals. Solid lines represent main effects observed in multiple studies. Dashed lines represent moderation effects observed in individual studies.

positive or negative affect, although we also briefly cover relevant findings concerning stress and well-being (for a review of research on hierarchy and health, see Ref. [20]).

Social rank and emotional experience

Several theoretical perspectives converge to suggest that possessing low rank in a social hierarchy can be a source of negative emotion and stress, whereas high rank promotes positive emotions and well-being [3,14,21]. Consistent with this general idea, evidence indicates that having low rank can fuel feelings of inferiority and concomitant shame, social anxiety, and depression [22]. Similarly, in an experiment, participants who were assigned control over resources in a task reported experiencing more positive emotions (amusement, happiness, pride) and less negative emotions (anger, embarrassment, fear, sadness, shame) compared to their no-control counterparts [23**]. Furthermore, in an experiment involving an emotionally evocative group discussion, group members who were assigned a leader role and given control over resources experienced more positive emotions and less anger compared to their subordinate counterparts [24**]. Other work found that leaders in the military and government had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and experienced less anxiety compared to non-leaders. These effects were more pronounced for leaders who had higher rather than lower power, and they were driven by powerful leaders' greater sense of control [25**]. Later research revealed that the stress-buffering effects of higher rank occur only in stable rather than unstable hierarchies [26]. Finally, in a series of correlational, experimental, and

longitudinal studies, higher sociometric status (respect and admiration from peers) predicted more positive and less negative emotional experience via feelings of power and social acceptance, and these effects were stronger than those of socioeconomic status (i.e. income) [27].

More recent research focused on specific emotions that may play a role in the regulation of social hierarchy [28], most notably pride and envy [29]. Pride is thought to have evolved to enhance the status of higher-ranking individuals, whereas envy is thought to motivate lower-ranking individuals to level rank differences [30,31]. Indeed, higher-ranking individuals are prone to experience pride due to their superior standing and the praise that may accompany it [32,33], and lower-ranking individuals are prone to envy their higher-ranking counterparts [31,34]. Accordingly, research shows that envy and pride are intimately connected: The two frequently co-occur, and pride displays on the part of higher-ranking individuals fuel feelings of envy in lower-ranking individuals [29].

Evidence suggests that the effects of social rank on pride and envy are moderated by personality characteristics of the involved parties. One trait that is conceptually related to rank is narcissism, which is a desire for self-enhancement and social standing [35]. Studies found that narcissism amplified people's feelings of pride and satisfaction after outperforming another person [a proxy for status, [36] as well as their feelings of envy when being outperformed [37]. In another study, leader narcissism fueled

malicious envy on the part of followers [38]. Conversely, feelings of envy among subordinates were buffered by supervisors' ethical leadership [39].

The negative emotions associated with low rank can translate into positive emotions when the high-ranking party fails. In a study on intergroup competition, individuals' pain about their in-group's inferiority emerged as a potent predictor of *schadenfreude* (pleasure at another's misfortune) following the subsequent failure of the superior out-group [40]. Such *schadenfreude* may be functional in that it contributes to the regulation of social hierarchies. Research found that *schadenfreude* was intensified toward initially successful (i.e. high-status), dominant individuals, and this effect was mediated by inferiors' experience of malicious envy [41]. The study further showed that public expressions of *schadenfreude* reduced the perceived dominance of the superior person, suggesting that *schadenfreude* serves to recalibrate unbalanced hierarchies.

Finally, social rank appears to shift the *source* of people's emotions. In a series of studies involving different measures and manipulations of social power, lower-power individuals derived relatively more inspiration from other people's life stories, whereas higher-power individuals derived greater inspiration from their own experiences [42]. This suggests that power not only increases self-focus [1,43**,44], but also enables people to derive more positive emotions from their inner selves.

Social rank and emotional expression

Theoretical perspectives on social rank suggest two different yet complementary predictions concerning emotional expression. Because of their privileged positions, higher-ranking individuals may express more positive and less negative emotion than their lower-ranking counterparts [3] and/or exhibit greater consistency between their internal feelings and outward expressions [45,46], because their high standing reduces the need to conform to social norms [42,47]. Consistent with these ideas, participants who were experimentally assigned high power in a group discussion expressed more positive emotions and less anger than did individuals who were assigned low power [24**]. Another study found that smiling correlated with experienced positive affect among participants who were experimentally assigned to high-power or equal-power positions, but not among participants assigned to low-power positions [48].

Although higher-ranking individuals are generally disposed to experience and express more positive emotion than their lower-ranking counterparts, when angered higher-ranking individuals are also more prone to express their anger. In a recent study, people were more likely to express anger at an offender when they had more rather than less power than the offender [49**]. This effect was

mediated by negative social appraisals: Lower-power people anticipated more negative consequences of directly confronting the perpetrator, which led them to express their anger indirectly by sharing it with others. Along similar lines, power influences people's strategic emotional expressions in negotiations. Expressing emotions such as anger or disappointment can help elicit concessions in negotiations [50,51], but it can also backfire [52,53]. A recent study found that bargainers adjust their emotional communications to their relative power. Specifically, bargainers were more likely to exaggerate their disappointment and less likely to exaggerate their anger in response to a low offer when they had low rather than high power [54].

Finally, there is evidence that status influences *how* people express emotions. In a group study, individuals who were randomly allocated high-status positions exhibited more dominant, disinhibited laughs, whereas those who were allocated low-status positions displayed more submissive, inhibited laughs [55**]. Low-status individuals were also more likely to adapt their laughter to the context than were high-status individuals. Together, these findings suggest that social rank disinhibits emotional expression, thereby increasing the consistency between experienced and expressed emotions.

Social rank and emotional responsiveness

Different theoretical perspectives make compatible predictions about the effects of social rank on emotional responsiveness. Because of the tendency to experience greater social distance from others [5] and to prioritize their own interests over others' [1], higher-ranking individuals may be expected to be less responsive to others' emotions, compared to their lower-ranking counterparts. This may be reflected in differential emotion recognition, experiences of reciprocal or complementary emotions, and behavioral adjustment.

Regarding emotion recognition, early studies indicated that higher rank (in this case power) undermines accuracy. Specifically, participants primed with high rather than low power were less accurate at recognizing facial emotional expressions depicted in photos [43**], and participants assigned to high-power rather than low-power roles were less accurate at recognizing their partner's emotions during dyadic interactions [56].

However, subsequent work paints a more complicated picture. One study found that higher power decreased emotion recognition accuracy, whereas higher status increased it [57]. Other work indicates that high-power individuals with prosocial rather than antisocial dispositions are more accurate at recognizing emotions in others [58,59]. Presumably, elevated power amplifies dispositional tendencies [45], thereby increasing emotion recognition accuracy of prosocially oriented people.

Finally, the effects of power on emotion recognition appear to depend on perceivers' hierarchical concerns. One study examined the effects of perceived legitimacy of power roles by either assigning power roles based on an unjust procedure or by making role assignments that were incongruent with participants' personal sense of power. Participants given illegitimate (rather than legitimate) leader roles were more accurate at detecting subordinates' expressions of anger (which signal a potential threat to the leader's illegitimate position), whereas participants given illegitimate subordinate roles were more accurate at recognizing leaders' fear (which signals an opportunity to restore an illegitimate power balance) [60].

Regarding the experience of reciprocal or complementary emotions, early research revealed that higher-power people are less likely than lower-power people to exhibit similar emotional responses to evocative stimuli as their relationship partners [61]. Later work found that conversation partners with a higher sense of power showed lower emotional responsiveness to the suffering of their partner, as reflected in lower distress and compassion and cardiovascular patterns indicative of autonomic emotion regulation [62**]. These differences appeared to have a motivational underpinning: Higher-power individuals reported a weaker desire to develop a close relationship with their interaction partner, suggesting that they were less motivated to invest in them emotionally. Other work points to qualitative rather than quantitative differences in emotional responsiveness between high- and low-power people. In a dyadic negotiation, one party's expressions of anger triggered reciprocal anger in higher-power targets but complementary fear in lower-power targets [63].

Regarding behavioral adjustment, research has documented effects of rank on behavioral responses to emotional expressions. Across methodologically diverse studies, lower-power negotiators generally conceded more when their opponent expressed anger rather than happiness or no emotion, whereas higher-power negotiators did not [64–68,69**]. However, power does not seem to make people uniformly oblivious to the emotions of others. One study found that higher-power people were generally unresponsive to others' expressions of anger, but did respond competitively when they perceived the anger as inappropriate [53]. Along related lines, expressions of contempt promoted task performance among relatively low-status targets, but fueled aggression among high-status targets [70].

Conclusions and future directions

Our review allows for four broad conclusions regarding the effects of social rank on emotional experience, expression, and responsiveness. First, lower-ranking individuals generally experience more negative emotions, whereas higher-ranking individuals experience more positive

emotions. This conclusion resonates with the idea that the preferential access to social and material resources that is afforded by high rank enhances well-being, health, and quality of life [3,71].

Second, lower-ranking individuals tend to adapt their emotional expressions to the social context, whereas higher-ranking individuals express their feelings more freely. Higher-ranking individuals thus show a relatively strong correspondence between the emotions they feel and the emotions they express, whereas lower-ranking individuals regulate their emotional expressions in light of possible social consequences. This regulation may take the form of de-amplifying the expression of experienced emotions [49**,72] or selectively expressing emotions that may be expected to have beneficial consequences without entailing risk of repercussions (e.g. expressing disappointment rather than anger) [50]. Thus, although extant theorizing on power has emphasized the cognitive and behavioral flexibility of high-power compared to low-power people [4], our review indicates that lower-power people are more flexible in their emotional expressions in social settings.

Third, lower-ranking individuals tend to accurately recognize the emotional expressions of others [43**] and respond to them in socially adaptive ways [62**], whereas higher-ranking individuals do so only when others' emotions have bearing on their own goals [60]. Presumably due to their greater self-focus and independence from others [1], higher-ranking individuals are generally more likely than their lower-ranking counterparts to disregard others' emotions as they do not feel the need to pay attention to others, except when others' emotions have implications for their personal interests.

Fourth, power and status appear to have comparable effects on emotional experience, expression, and responsiveness. We encountered only one study that found differential effects of power and status, on emotion recognition [53]. The largely similar consequences of power and status for emotional dynamics suggest opportunities for integrating theoretical insights and empirical findings from the partly separate literatures on power and status, at least as far as emotional processes are concerned [for differential effects of power and status in other domains see Ref. 16]. Indeed, one study found that the effects of status on emotional experience were mediated by feelings of power and social acceptance [27]. It appears as though power and status share a potent working ingredient, which accounts for their comparable emotional consequences. Future research could therefore investigate the commonalities rather than the differences between power and status. For now, the conclusion is warranted that power and status — the main foundations of social hierarchy — have far-reaching consequences for people's private and social emotional lives.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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