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Activating the “Big Man”: Social Status, Patronage Networks, and Pro-Social Behavior in African Bureaucracies

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Abstract

Public service delivery by African states is often characterized as particularist, favoring ethnic, personal or political networks of those inside the state over universalist, pro-social services to citizens. One explanation for particularist service delivery focuses on societal patronage norms, with “Big Men” providing for members of their networks. Despite the prominence of this line of reasoning and the anecdotal prevalence of “Big Men” in politics and society, hardly any research has quantitatively assessed the effects of “big man” governance inside the state. Through a behavioral experiment with over 1,300 Ugandan bureaucrats, our article seeks to address this gap. In the experiment, we find that activating social status—that is, “big man” status—in bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks significantly curbs their pro-social behavior. Our article contributes an important empirical micro-foundation to help explain one cause of limited universal service delivery by bureaucrats.

Introduction

While many African states provide universal public services on paper (e.g., free primary education for all), public service delivery by African states—and other developing country governments—is often particularist and clientelist in practice (Lemarchand 1972; World Bank 2017). Rather than being delivered impartially and universally to citizens, public services are often delivered by state agents (patrons) to members (clients) of their political, ethnic, and/or personal networks in exchange for their loyalty and political support (van de Walle 2007). Particularist, political and personal—rather than universalist pro-social—criteria thus often govern service delivery. The “dominant paradigm” for understanding this outcome is some variation of the neopatrimonial thesis (cf. Medard 1982): African politics is structured by a set of informal institutions that are variously labeled “big man politics,” “personal rule,” “politics of the belly” or “neopatrimonialism.” (van de Walle 2007, 5). The often patronage-based operating procedures of the state can lead to personalistic, ethnic, or otherwise narrowed politics in which “a position of power is valued for the resources it procures to one’s family and kin” (van de Walle 2003, 311). Next to enriching themselves individually, “big men”¹ politicians thus redistribute public goods to their communities and members of their network rather than focusing on universalist, public goods delivery to benefit society as a whole—including those outside their networks.

Qualitative research has underscored that such patronage practices—in the form of the exchange of gifts, favors, and

services—are common not only in politics but in many aspects of society and the economy (Bayart 2009; Chabal and Daloz 1999; de Sardan 1999a; van de Walle 2003). As a corollary, recent studies have shown that “big men” matter not only in high politics centered around the executive branch. Recently, McCauley (2014), for instance, argues that Pentecostal church leaders can be understood to govern as “big men,” while Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012) explain the behavior of local chiefs through a “big man” lens.

If “big man” behavior extends to lower rungs of power in politics and society, then it is not implausible to assume that it equally extends to those working at lower rungs (below politicians) of the state—that is to bureaucrats. In many developing contexts, bureaucrats often occupy privileged positions, earning higher incomes and having direct access to state resources which could be redistributed to their communities and networks (World Bank 2019).

We argue that whether bureaucratic behavior is shaped by “big man” norms is consequential for public service delivery. Bureaucrats can be crucial actors in “personalizing” public services—that is in ensuring that each purportedly public service is targeted and granted individually as a “favor” to individual supporters rather than universally to citizens (cf. Oliveros 2016). Prior quantitative research has largely focused on explaining such behavior through a principal-agent lens: bureaucrats channel public services to supporters of their political patrons, both because of a sense of loyalty (they owe political patrons their employment) and because political patrons may be able to withdraw employment or threaten transfers if bureaucrats do not comply (e.g., Brierley 2020; Oliveros and Schuster 2018; Robinson and Verdier 2013). However, it is likely that bureaucrats conceive of

¹Women can also be “big men”, but the term refers to roles that men have traditionally dominated, which explains, at least in part, its gendered nature.

themselves as “Big Men” too. They are not simply agents of other principals. They have individual ambition and discretionary fields of action; they are important nodes in the state’s patronage network, capable of autonomous action (Hassan and O’Mealia 2018; Harris et al. 2020; Poteete 2003).² Understanding whether bureaucrats behave as “Big Men” is thus central to understanding variation in the extent to which service delivery is particularist rather than universal.

Our article addresses part of this gap through a lab-in-the-field experiment with over 1,300 Ugandan bureaucrats. In the experiment, we prime bureaucrats about their social status and importance (activating the “big man”), and assess the effects of this prime in an adapted dictator game on monetary donations (of non-trivial amounts of money) to pro-social charities. We find that bureaucrats primed to think about their social status donate significantly less to pro-social causes. Importantly, we also find that this effect is fully moderated by bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks. In other words, reminding bureaucrats who are embedded in patronage networks about their social status significantly reduces their pro-social behavior towards groups outside their patronage networks. This effect remains robust when controlling for a range of other factors, such as gender, education, rank, and income. By contrast, the social status prime has no effect on bureaucrats who are not embedded in patronage networks. Similarly, a placebo prime regarding the societal impact of bureaucratic work remains insignificant, which suggests that our findings are not driven by simply priming bureaucrats to think they have done enough to help society.

We interpret our findings as evidence that the dynamics of “big man” politics do, in fact, play out within Uganda’s bureaucracy. “big man” bureaucrats in patronage networks curb universal, pro-social behavior, which benefits groups outside their kin, ethnic, and/or political networks. Our article thus contributes an important social status micro-foundation to help improve our understanding of any limited universal, pro-social service delivery by bureaucracies in similar contexts in the developing world. It also suggests that norms—rather than only instrumental, incentive-based patron-client linkages—contribute to the lack of pro-social behavior and public service delivery.³ More generally, it provides the first quantitative assessment of the effects of “big man” social status inside the bureaucracy. Despite the prominence of “big man” rule in the literature on African politics (Bayart 2009; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Jackson and Rosberg 1982), scholars have, to our knowledge, yet to assess its effects quantitatively and experimentally.

“Big Man” Bureaucrats, Social Status, Patronage Networks, and Pro-Social Behavior in Bureaucracies

To develop our hypotheses, we draw on three diverse sets of studies: African politics studies on “big men”, public

²In addition, bureaucrats are freer agents after their political patrons leave office. This scenario is not infrequent: bureaucratic tenure often exceeds political tenure (Schuster 2016).

³We use the term “pro-social” as it connects to a wide existing literature (Ashraf, Bandiera, and Lee (2014); Banuri and Keefer (2016)). Consistent with this literature, the use of “pro-social” is not meant to signal that African bureaucrats are anti-social, but rather focuses on the degree to which bureaucrats are willing to work for the benefit of society at large.

administration studies on bureaucratic status, and social psychology studies on the relationship between social status and pro-social behavior. Our argument builds on findings in social psychology (i.e., Tajfel et al. 1971) and political science (i.e., Posner and Young 2007), which suggest that when individuals identify with, or are part of, sub-groups in a society, they will seek to benefit members of that group. We take greater status in a group (patronage network and/or ethnic group) to indicate a stronger attachment with and/or degree of investment in that group and thus a desire to work for its benefits, in part to retain one’s status in the group (which is in line with the group engagement model of social identity-motivated behaviors in organizations, e.g., Blader and Tyler 2009). Importantly, greater expectations regarding the delivery of private or club goods are placed on higher-status individuals (i.e., MPs) within these networks/groups (Gadjanova 2017). Further, social identity theory argues that group membership not only provides self-esteem, but that improving the status of one’s group, potentially via the provision of resources, can improve group-based self-esteem (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), which creates a self-reinforcing cycle of strengthening group-based self-esteem and providing for one’s group. We apply this logic to bureaucrats through the lens of “big man” politics; we argue that higher social status (being a big man) should lead bureaucrats to provide services to those in their group (and eschew pro-social behavior towards those outside their group) because their social status in the group is tied to their ability to provide particularist benefits.

The term “big man” was originally coined by Sahlin (1963) in the context of Pacific Island chiefs. “big man” rule has since evolved to describe several interrelated characteristics (see, e.g., Cammack 2007; Hyden 2006; McCauley 2014), in particular the maintenance of authority and influence through informal patronage networks, in which big men gain loyalty, support, and trust from, typically, ethnic and kin connections by providing them with access to (state) goods, resources, and services, which they would—in the absence of a strong state—otherwise be unable to access. While big man rule is most typically associated with African presidentialism (Bratton and van de Walle 1997), a range of studies underscore the prevalence of big men throughout African politics and society—for instance, local chiefs or Pentecostal church leaders (Marshall 2009; McCauley 2014; Kalu 2008; Sahlin 1963). Importantly, these overlooked “big men” are those who have access to more (usually state) resources such that they are a focal point for communities and individuals when seeking resources. Big men such as bureaucrats, local councilors, or local party leaders are more accessible than the head of state or member of parliament and thus likely act as a regular citizen’s first point of access into the ruling patronage network.⁴

Citizens may thus often have multiple “big men” in their networks—for instance, local chiefs, politicians, church leaders, and as we had argued in the introduction, bureaucrats—whom they may contact for help when needing access to goods and services. In return, “big men” gain loyalty,

⁴While the African governments of today tend to be characterized as dominated by patronage networks/governance and particularist rule, there are of course exceptions: some states are much less patronage-based than others and even within heavily patrimonial contexts, there are pockets of effectiveness in which certain ministries, agencies, etc. are less patronage-based (Posner and Young 2007).

support, trust and, in particular, social status in their networks (Price 1974).⁵

As noted in the introduction, bureaucrats often have privileged access to state resources and may thus act as “big men” in their own right - rather than only clients or brokers of political patrons. It is plausible that bureaucrats connected to networks wish to act as “big men” and thus prioritize particularist services to their networks over universalist service delivery to benefit the public as a whole (in short: pro-social behavior⁶). Acting as “big men” furthers their status in their community and network, which might enhance their standing with political patrons, enhance their careers and prestige in their communities should they return, and enhance the standing of their family members who remain in their community, among other benefits (De Sardan 1999b; Krueger 1974; Lentz 2014; Price 1974; Rose-Ackerman 1999).⁷ Moreover, “big man” bureaucrats likely have internalized norms of reciprocity within their ethnic or kin group—rather than collectivist norms towards society as a whole—and feel a sense of obligation towards their ethnic and kin connections, who might have helped them in the trajectory to obtain a public sector job (Chaudhry 1997; Foltz and Opoku-Agyemang 2015). By contrast, bureaucrats do not derive similar private benefits from providing universalist goods to the public as a whole—which also benefit those outside the big man’s network.

Similar to the behavior of African “big man” heads of state (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; van de Walle 2001), bureaucrats are also incentivized to ensure that state resources flow through them to those they deem worthy (either as supporters or potential challengers that must be bought off) as this is central to their survival. By playing a more prominent role in the use of state funds, the bureaucrat exercises more authority, is seen as more important in state affairs, and can more easily use state resources (i.e., goods and services) in ways that benefit his/her political and/or career ambitions.

In the literature on patronage states, access to resources and the use of those resources to further one’s network is thus typically what makes someone a “big man” (Cammack 2007; van de Walle 2001). Consequently, even lower-level public employees can be “big men.” Our own conceptualization echoes this approach. As a result, access to state resources per se is insufficient for being a “big man.”⁸ Consistent with

⁵Social status is typically defined as an individual’s social rank or relative standing along a valued social dimension (e.g., Magee and Galinsky 2008; Pettit et al. 2013). In line with our “big man” conceptualization, high-status individuals help their social group attain its goals (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972). In return, they enjoy deference from and influence over individuals positioned lower in the social hierarchy (Anderson and Brown 2010). Status is thus conferred in the eyes of others to those with perceived higher social standing or rank in a pecking order based on mutually valued social attributes (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Price 1974)—such as the ability to provide access to state resources.

⁶Pro-social behavior is typically understood as behavior to benefit others or a social collective (Grant and Berg 2010). In that sense, big men may, of course, act pro-socially within their ethnic or kin group by redistributing state resources to it. We, by contrast, are interested in pro-social behavior which seeks to benefit society or the public as a whole, rather than only the bureaucrat’s ethnic or kin groups, and understand pro-social behavior in this manner throughout the manuscript.

⁷The social psychology literature underscores that high status also confers more general advantages in life, including social support, easier access to opportunities and a greater likelihood of receiving unsolicited help, for instance (see, e.g., Van der Vegt, Bunderson, and Oosterhof (2006)).

⁸In fact, rank in hierarchy (rather than connections) does not moderate the effect of social status in our lab game (see results in Supplementary Appendix Table A13).

scholarly conceptualizations, it is instead the combination of connections to a patronage network and access to state resources (which, as aforementioned, bureaucrats at all levels of hierarchy to some extent enjoy) which matters for “big man” status.⁹ We would thus expect bureaucrats with greater status in patronage networks to curb universal pro-social behavior and service delivery. Our first hypothesis reflects this expectation:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Greater social status of bureaucrats connected to patronage networks reduces their pro-social behavior.

This expectation is also congruent with the more general literature on ethnic/racial diversity and pro-social behavior. This literature finds that ethnic diversity reduces pro-social behavior, plausibly because individuals of a given ethnic group are less willing to contribute to a good that benefits the public as a whole, as those benefits accrue not only to their own (ethnic) group but also other ethnic groups; or because pro-social within-group norms are not easily enforced across groups (cf. Alesina and La-Ferrara 2005; Andreoni et al. 2011; Habyarimana et al. 2007).

Ironically, social status would thus have the opposite effect on pro-social behavior in “big men” bureaucracies than its purported effect in relatively more institutionalized bureaucracies. Weber (1978) classically argued that social status—and a claim to social prestige—is central to bureaucrats identifying with public service as a particular “conduct of life,” in which bureaucrats accept “duty” towards the purposes of public office and, in doing so, strictly adhere to formal procedures, suppress all extra-official personal ties and commit to impartial public (rather than particularist) service. Following Weber (1978), in our context, we would thus not expect greater social status to curb pro-social behavior of bureaucrats who lack connections within patronage networks. Outside such networks, greater social status is not associated with “big man” norms—and should thus not curb pro-social behavior.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Greater social status of bureaucrats outside of patronage networks does not reduce their pro-social behavior.

Our hypotheses emphasize the importance of patronage networks in determining the presence of “big man” behavior in bureaucrats, and reduced pro-social behavior. Importantly, our argument does not presume that pro-social behavior is generally frowned upon, but rather that for bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks targeted, particularistic delivery of benefits inside those patronage networks (for which bureaucrats providing the benefits selectively can claim credit) is more effective at enhancing one’s status within patronage power networks than universalistic pro-social service delivery (Chubb 1982; Oliveros 2016).¹⁰

The caveat to our hypotheses, of course, is that social status might affect pro-social behavior of individuals irrespective of their role as bureaucrats. A large literature in

⁹As detailed below, our prime renders salient this “big man” status of bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks, and we would thus expect it to curb pro-social behavior of those bureaucrats.

¹⁰Of course, as underscored by H2, not all bureaucrats face these incentives, as not all are embedded in patronage networks. As Leonard (1991) has underscored, in fact, some bureaucrats in African bureaucracies achieve career advancement precisely through pro-social achievements.

social psychology and economics has assessed the effect of socioeconomic status on pro-social behavior (i.e., [Korndorfer, Eglo, and Schmukle 2015](#)). Several studies associate greater social status with less pro-social behavior—for instance, as higher-status individuals have to rely less on others to achieve their aims and thus become less compassionate (see, for a review, [Piff and Robinson 2017](#)). Others, however, find the opposite. High-status individuals may, for instance, be more concerned about their status and reputation and, as a consequence, act more pro-socially to maintain their social status ([Benabou and Tirole 2006](#)). Effects seem to vary across countries (cf. [Korndorfer, Eglo, and Schmukle 2015](#)), suggesting that greater social status may have positive or negative average effects in Uganda. What our hypotheses then suggest, at a minimum, is that social status has a more negative effect on pro-social behavior for bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks relative to those outside patronage networks.

The Ugandan “Big Man” Context

“big man” rule is, as noted above, the maintenance of authority and influence through informal patronage networks, in which big men gain support by providing access to (state) goods, resources, and services. Uganda is often cited as an example of a patrimonial state centered around a big man—President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) government—who attains his primary goal of maintaining office and its associated prestige and wealth through the provision of patronage, in turn creating a network of big men throughout Ugandan politics, government and society ([Mwenda and Tangri 2005](#)). Uganda is thus an illustrative case to assess the relationship between social status of bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks and pro-social behavior.

For example, Museveni’s government has drastically increased the number of districts in the country from 39 when Museveni took office in 1986 to 134 today. Scholars have indicated that the creation of new districts is one way in which Museveni provides patronage to supporters by providing more jobs in localities that support him electorally while also re-centralizing power in himself ([Green 2010](#); [Grossman and Lewis 2014](#); [Tripp 2010](#)). As [Aili Tripp \(2010\)](#) illustrates, Museveni has used patronage to buy off and co-opt opposition leaders and entrench himself in power.

Given that Museveni’s Uganda is structured as a patronage machine ([Tripp 2010](#)), it is not implausible to assume that civil servants will mirror the behavior of Museveni and other “big men” in his network and, given their access to state resources, act as “big men” towards their patronage networks. To do so, is to survive and thrive. [Mwenda and Tangri \(2005\)](#) have provided key insights into the working of bureaucratic “big men”. First, many, though, as our data further below suggests, not all, bureaucrats owe their job to expansion of the patronage system (through the expansion of districts as well as the steadily increasing size of the national bureaucracy), which suggests that they are slotted into such networks and see the value of being part of and important in these networks

(whether they be kin-, ethnic-, or partisan-based).¹¹ Second, bureaucrats have used their positions to distribute funds in ways that ensure the survival of NRM politicians, which is a signal of their importance in such networks. Third, ministers and top administrators often do not properly manage lower-level bureaucrats, which opens up space for them to use state resources to improve their position and power in patronage networks ([Mwenda and Tangri 2005](#)).

Uganda then provides an ideal case in which to study the presence of big man rule in the bureaucracy. It, like some other African states, is run by a big man, such that big man behavior is normalized and seen as desirable for achieving one’s goals. Further, there is evidence that bureaucrats have both the incentive and opportunity to act—and do in fact act—as “big men” within patronage networks.

Data and Methods

Assessing the effect of social status on pro-social behavior by bureaucrats poses two immediate methodological challenges. First, pro-social behavior is likely to shape the social status of African bureaucrats. As a consequence of this potential reverse causality, observational studies of social status and pro-social behavior are unlikely to enable valid causal inferences. Second, prior studies have underscored that bureaucratic behavior varies significantly both across countries and within countries and across and within public sector agencies, threatening the validity of inferences from national- or organizational-level data ([Gingerich 2014](#)). We address these concerns through a lab-in-the-field experiment with bureaucrats from a variety of organizations, which combines a prime about social status with an adapted dictator game in which bureaucrats donate real monetary amounts to pro-social charities.

Sample

We conducted this experiment with 1,397 bureaucrats in Uganda. For our experiment, we sampled bureaucrats as traditionally understood: central government employees across hierarchical ranks (from administrative support to management) with administrative roles in the broadest sense (excluding, for instance, teachers, doctors, policemen, or military personnel). To sample our bureaucrats, we would have, ideally, relied on complete lists of public employees in central government institutions. Unfortunately, the government was unable or unwilling to share this list, and like several prior studies surveying bureaucrats in developing countries (see, e.g. [Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016](#); [Oliveros and Schuster 2018](#)), we thus lacked survey frames for representative samples. Instead, we relied on informal quota sampling to ensure bureaucrats across a range of central government institutions, job functions, ranks in hierarchy, ages, education levels, and contract types were included. To informally quota sample respondents, we contacted government institutions one-by-one and asked for access. Within each organization, enumerators were instructed to seek to interview as many respondents as possible, ensuring a variety of job types. Local enumerators then conducted interviews and the lab game face-to-face with bureaucrats between June and August 2017. Survey fielding was preceded by cognitive interviews with ten bureaucrats to ensure our game, prime and survey measures were understood as intended.

¹¹These patronage networks are many and diverse, but not all politicians and bureaucrats are members of such networks ([Asimwe 2013](#)), and “islands of effectiveness”—that are independent of such networks—do persist across the bureaucracy ([Therkildsen et al. 2007](#)).

Our sampling strategy yielded a diverse set of bureaucrats, which is roughly split on gender (46% female), as well as split across hierarchical ranks (13% manager, 47% technical-professional level, and 40% administrative support), and across central government institutions (33 in total),¹² relatively educated (86% university-educated) and 39 years old on average.¹³ While we cannot claim our sample is representative, the diversity of our participants and experimental treatment within our sample do not give us any reason to believe that a representative sample would have led to different results. In fact, a survey using this sampling strategy in Ghana returned a relatively representative sample (Harris et al. 2020).

Experimental Design

Our experiment consists of an adapted dictator game to measure pro-social behavior, which was preceded by a randomly assigned treatment prime about social status and a placebo prime about working for society. Prior to the prime, we fielded a survey questionnaire (16 June to 10 August 2017) to obtain measures of patronage connections and control variables for our analyses.¹⁴

Our adapted dictator game to measure pro-social behavior of bureaucrats is based on Ashraf, Bandiera, and Lee (2014) and Banuri and Keefer (2016), among others. We selected this game as prior studies find that bureaucratic behavior in this pro-social game in the lab is a strong predictor of their pro-social behavior in public service delivery (Ashraf, Bandiera and Lee 2014). In a standard dictator game, two players receive an endowment and the first player can transfer any proportion of her endowment to the other. In the adapted game to measure pro-social behavior of bureaucrats, the second player is replaced with an organization with a pro-social mandate. To enhance confidence that donations to this organization reflect pro-social behavior, we followed Banuri and Keefer (2016) in searching for organizations that broadly mirror the mandates of public sector organizations: they are spread (in terms of services provided) across the country, serve a large group of individuals and have no other (e.g., religious) mission. In the case of Banuri and Keefer (2016), for instance, this organization is the Indonesian Red Cross, while in the case of Ashraf, Bandiera, and Lee (2014) (which focuses on public health agents) it is a charity that provides care to HIV/AIDS patients. To ensure a broad range of pro-social organizations, we replicated the choice of the Red Cross (Red Cross Uganda) from Banuri and Keefer (2016), but added two further pro-social organizations to the list of charities bureaucrats could donate to (Uganda Women's Network and Joy for Elderly Care Uganda).

Bureaucrats were asked to donate to any of the three charities as much as they liked out of an endowment of 10,000 Ush (equivalent to US\$2.82 at the time of the game). They kept the remainder to themselves. The total endowment represents

more than the daily per capita income in Uganda, suggesting the stakes of this game were not trivial to participants. To encourage pro-social donations in the lab, participants were informed that any donations would be tripled by the researchers and then donated to the beneficiary organizations (see [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for a write-up of the lab game). While donations to a charity are not a perfect measure of pro-social behavior, given that this measure is used widely in past studies (e.g., Banuri and Keefer 2016; Banuri and Keefer 2019) and Esteve et al. (2016), as noted, predictive of actual pro-social behavior of bureaucrats in the field (Ashraf, Bandiera and Lee 2014), we are confident it does in fact capture pro-social behavior.¹⁵

Our theoretical argument has two empirical implications. Activating social status of participants embedded in patronage networks should lead to (1) less pro-social behavior towards out-groups and (2) more favoritism towards their in-group (those who are part of their network). We note that our experiment only allows bureaucrats to donate to a pro-social cause. It does not provide an opportunity for bureaucrats to give donations to “their group,” which would allow us to measure the second empirical implication of our argument. This is a limitation of our study, which is due to practical measurement constraints. Patronage networks of individuals differ. As such, groups such as political parties or ethnic organizations—which could have been potential recipients of donations and might relate to patronage networks—might not in fact reflect the precise patronage networks which matter to respondents. Moreover, individuals can only gain social status in a network if their contributions and largess to the network are identified with them by network members. As such, donating to an organization (such as a party) potentially within the patronage network through an intermediary (the survey project team) would have not enabled participants to claim credit for their donation and further their status. We therefore limited ourselves to measuring pro-social behavior (the first empirical implication of our theory) by donating to a charity.

The pro-social game was preceded by a randomly assigned prime. In our experimental treatment, this prime rendered salient the social status and importance of the participant: “In one minute, could you describe your importance and standing in Ugandan society given your position in the public sector?” Participants were free to talk to the enumerator for a minute in response to this question.¹⁶ While the exact conversations were not recorded, enumerators did code the topic of each discussion, and this data suggests that the prime worked as intended as 59% did talk about their high status directly: 47% indicate that they are an important person in Ugandan society, 6% indicate that others look up to them, and about

¹²Of these 33, we obtained at least 30 responses from 15. In the regression analyses in [Supplementary Appendix Table A10](#), we introduce institution fixed effects for these 15, collapsing respondents from other institutions into an “other institution” category.

¹³The high education level of our sample may suggest that we do, in fact, have a survey of relatively high-level bureaucrats, and thus more likely to be the type of big men bureaucrats that we are interested in studying.

¹⁴The study was approved by the University of Nottingham IRB and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST; study number: SS 4279) in May 2017.

¹⁵As the lab game setup involves bureaucrats making donations, it might be construed as a measure of the private citizen behavior of bureaucrats. Several contextual features suggest this is not the case. First, the experiment comes at the end of a detailed survey about being a bureaucrat (and we prime bureaucratic prestige). As such, we do not have reason to believe our respondents are not thinking about being bureaucrats when responding to the prompt. Second, when asked to participate, respondents were told the survey focused on bureaucrats only. Respondents were thus aware we were surveying them for being bureaucrats. Third, the prime explicitly referred to the respondents' status as bureaucrats. And finally, those who are part of patronage networks respond differently, which suggests that they consider their patronage (private) network membership when participating in quasi-bureaucratic tasks, and that this can shape how they behave (in this case, less pro-socially).

¹⁶The wording for this prime was pre-tested using cognitive surveys. Cognitive interview evidence suggests the prime was well-understood and understood as intended.

6% discussed how important they are for others to survive and obtain government resources. A further 30% discussed their role in providing public services, which given the vital importance of this in Ugandan society, could also be viewed as an indirect high-status discussion. Importantly, less than 1% of respondents ($N = 2$) expressed that they have a low standing or are not important in Ugandan society. Therefore, we are confident that our prime worked as intended (although, of course, we only have this data for the treatment group, so this is only suggestive evidence). Further, as discussed below, the results hold when estimating the complier average causal effect (CACE).

After a minute had passed, a “continue” button appeared on the enumeration tablet, which prompted the enumerator to proceed. Our prime reminded participants of their elevated social status given their position in the public sector. As such, it allows us to exogenously manipulate the salience of the participants’ perception of their social status prior to the pro-social game. In addition, the prime could also, to some extent, encourage self-persuasion of the bureaucrat’s social status. As social psychological research underscores, interventions that put participants in situations in which they are compelled to persuade themselves can be motivationally effective (Aronson 1999), including for shaping bureaucratic behavior (Bellé 2013).¹⁷

To enhance confidence that our results are due to social status rather than having time to reflect for one minute or reflecting about Ugandan society more generally, we administered a similarly worded placebo treatment which equally focused on the participant’s work and Ugandan society, albeit without referring to the participant’s social status or importance: “In one minute, could you describe all the ways you can think about in which your work benefits Ugandan society and the lives of Ugandan citizens?” This placebo treatment approximates pro-social primes of bureaucrats employed elsewhere (e.g., Bellé 2013). As such, we would not expect it to reduce pro-social behavior. Further, the placebo treatment allows us to separate out the effects of bureaucratic identity on feeling one spends a lot of their time helping society and thus need not donate one’s money as well. The placebo only asks respondents to think about the good they have done. Therefore, if the placebo also dampens willingness to donate, then more than just status drives a lack of pro-social behavior: being reminded that one is doing enough for society may make one less pro-social. However, as discussed below, the placebo has no effect on donation behavior. Lastly, a control group received neither the social status nor the placebo prime before the donation game.

Approximately one-third of participants were randomly allocated to the treatment, placebo, and control group. Balance tests give us no reason to believe that randomization was unsuccessful: there are no significant differences across a range of observable characteristics (gender, years of service, rank, education, and income) between the three groups (Supplementary Appendix Tables A2 to A7).

Lastly, to assess the degree to which participants are embedded in patronage networks—and a social status prime could thus remind them of their “big man” role in patronage networks or not—we included a question about connections in the survey which preceded the prime and donation game

¹⁷Our prime can thus be effective where big man behavior is prevalent outside the lab. It is also plausibly externally valid: when our respondents are in their offices, for instance, receiving phone calls from people who need help, their status is plausibly primed, and likely more strongly than we do in our survey. Our prime thus has plausible real-world referents.

(this question and the prime were separated by more than 20 questions on the survey). In particular, we asked: “Having friends, family, and other personal acquaintances in the public sector can sometimes help one’s career. How important has it been for you to have friends, family members or other personal connections in the public sector to get your first job in the public sector?”¹⁸ If participants count on connections that were important enough to help them obtain a public sector job, we can plausibly take this as evidence that they are relatively more embedded in patronage networks (i.e., kin, ethnic, and/or political networks). As we discuss below, our results are robust to measuring instead the importance of connections for respondent’s future promotion prospects.

In Uganda, public sector jobs come with a significant wage premium, offer non-wage benefits and greater job stability than private sector jobs, and provide access to state resources (World Bank 2019). Obtaining a coveted public sector job through connections thus underscores the strength of and connection to a patronage network of a bureaucrat—and thus potential to act as a “big man” in their network. By contrast, bureaucrats who obtained their public sector job without personal connections are less likely to be embedded within strong patronage networks. Bureaucrats might, of course, be embedded within patronage networks even when those networks were not instrumental in their public sector recruitment. Insofar as this is the case, however, it biases our results against our hypotheses: those for whom networks are not important for being hired but are otherwise important/relevant will be coded in our analysis as not being embedded despite potentially being embedded in other ways. This then, in effect, includes some embedded respondents in our non-embedded group, thus biasing any differences between the two groups downward.

Respondents assessed this network question on a scale from 0 (not at all important) to 6 (very important). To compare the effects of our social status prime between bureaucrats more embedded in patronage networks and bureaucrats who are less embedded in patronage networks, we dichotomize our sample into bureaucrats for whom connections were at least somewhat important for public sector recruitment (scoring at least 1 out of 6) and those for whom connections were not at all important (scoring 0 out of 6).¹⁹ Roughly 30% of participants indicate that connections were at least somewhat important for them in obtaining their first public sector job, which we take to indicate that 30% of our respondents are embedded enough in (powerful) patronage networks to obtain a public sector job.^{20,21}

¹⁸This approach of measuring patronage embeddedness via kin and friend networks is key as it likely better reflects the diversity of patronage networks in Uganda that tend not to perfectly align with party membership (Asiimwe 2013).

¹⁹In Supplementary Appendix Table A15, we replicate the below analysis using all possible cut points between 1 and 5 on the response scale to code this variable. The results are remarkably consistent and robust.

²⁰This, of course, need not imply bureaucrats who did not have connections to obtain jobs lack any patronage networks. Rather, what it suggests is that they were not embedded enough in patronage networks with power to allocate public sector jobs. If those who did not obtain their jobs through connections are also embedded in patronage networks, however, this should dilute differences between treatment effects of connected vs. unconnected bureaucrats and thus bias our findings against our hypotheses.

²¹That not all bureaucrats indicate that they obtain their jobs through connections might stem in part from the various “islands of effectiveness” within the Ugandan bureaucracy that tend to rely more heavily on merit-based recruitment (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey 2016; Hickey 2019; Hickey, Bukonya and Matsiko 2021; Robinson 2006).

Lastly, our survey also covered a range of control variables for our analysis, including gender, age, education, years of service, type of contract, income (in bands), institution, and rank (administrative support, technical-professional and managerial). [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#) contains descriptive statistics for these variables.

In our analyses, we rely on randomization inference (e.g., [Gerber and Green 2012](#)) to estimate average treatment effects (ATE, for H1) and conditional average treatment effects (CATE, for H2). In part, this frees us from relying on strong parametric assumptions for our results; in part, it addresses potential issues resulting from our response variable being severely non-normal (see below). For models including control variables, we use ordinary least squares regression with bootstrapped standard errors for the same reasons.

Results

We present our results in four steps. First, we show descriptive statistics about pro-social behavior in our lab game. Subsequently, we assess the effect of our treatment and placebo primes on pro-social behavior. Thirdly, we assess how this effect differs between bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks and bureaucrats outside such networks. We find effects that are consistent with H1 and H2. Lastly, we show that these effects are robust to the inclusion of additional control variables, a continuous rather than dichotomous measure of connections and measuring connections in promotions rather than initial recruitment.

Pro-Social Lab Game

[Figure 1](#) shows the amounts donated by bureaucrats in the game as a percentage of the total endowment. On average, bureaucrats donated 2,100 Ush.—just over 20% of the endowment. These donations, however, came from a (significant) minority of bureaucrats: one-third of bureaucrats donated at least part of their endowment to a pro-social cause. The amount donated varied widely, from 2% to 100% of the endowment, with 15% of bureaucrats giving the total endowment to a pro-social cause. What explains this variation in pro-social behavior? We next turn to our prime results for answers.²²

Experimental Results

[Figure 2](#) shows the average effect of our social status treatment, placebo treatment, and control group on pro-social donations in our game.²³ Bureaucrats primed about their social status donate 525 Ush less in the pro-social game relative to the control group—that equates to over 5% of the total endowment and to 25% of the average donation of bureaucrats. This effect is significant at the 5% level ($p = .025$). By contrast, the placebo treatment has no statistically significant effect on pro-social donations ($p = .708$).²⁴

²²Respondents were asked to indicate how much they would like to donate by entering this amount into the enumerator's tablet. This number was then used to (automatically) calculate the amount that the enumerator would give to the respondent. Therefore, while the respondents were donating real money, they did not allocate physical cash.

²³[Supplementary Appendix Table A8](#) reports these results in table form.

²⁴Nor does the placebo treatment have a substantively significant average effect: it lowers donations by 95 Ush and thus less than 1% of the total endowment.

Randomly priming Ugandan bureaucrats about their social status thus seems to reduce their pro-social behavior. Next, we assess whether this effect stems from bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks who, as noted, would be reminded by the social status prime about their “big man” status within their network—and who we thus expect to discount the utility of pro-social behavior to benefit groups (including our charities) outside their networks. As noted, we assess this by comparing the effects of the social status prime between bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks, and bureaucrats outside such networks.

[Figure 3](#) shows that the effect of the prime is fully moderated by patronage connections.²⁵ Only bureaucrats connected to patronage networks reduce their pro-social behavior when primed about their social status. The social status prime has no significant effect on the pro-social behavior of bureaucrats outside patronage networks. In other words, when “big men” bureaucrats in patronage networks are reminded of their elevated status, they behave less pro-socially. Reminding other bureaucrats of their elevated social status has, by contrast, no significant CATE on their pro-social behavior.

The difference in the effects of social status on bureaucrats connected to patronage networks and bureaucrats outside such networks is both statistically highly significant and substantively large. Bureaucrats who form part of patronage networks and are primed about their social status donate 1639 Ush. less for pro-social causes ($p < .001$). As a result, bureaucrats in patronage networks who are primed about their “big man” social status nearly halved their pro-social donations relative to an average bureaucrat. By contrast, bureaucrats outside patronage networks only donate 117 Ush. less when primed about their social status - a statistically insignificant decrease in pro-social donations ($p = .673$).

These differential effects are robust to regression analysis with additional controls, an interaction between a continuous measure of connections and the social status prime, and the measurement of connections in promotions rather than initial recruitment.

Controlling for a range of potential confounders (gender, education, years of service, type of contract, income, and rank), the interaction between connections and social status remains significant, negative, and of a comparable substantive size both with a dichotomous measure of connections as in [figure 3](#) ($p = .017$) and a continuous measure of connections on the aforementioned 0-6 scale ($p = .023$) ([Supplementary Appendix Table A10](#)). The full regression results using the dichotomous measure of connections are reported in [Table 1](#). Here as in [figure 3](#), personal connections continue to fully moderate the relationship between the treatment and donations. Adding confidence in the validity of our findings, the effects of other significant control variables are also plausible: bureaucrats with higher income and more years of public service donate more in our pro-social game (both significant at the 1% level). The remaining variables do not reach statistical significance.²⁶

While we follow much of the patronage literature and focus our core measurement on connections in recruitment

²⁵[Supplementary Appendix Table A9](#) reports these results in table form.

²⁶While bureaucrats hired through connections tend to be less educated, have lower incomes, and be on temporary contracts, these differences do not impact our results (see [Table 1](#) and [Supplementary Appendix Tables A16–18](#) for more information on the characteristics of respondents with and without connections).

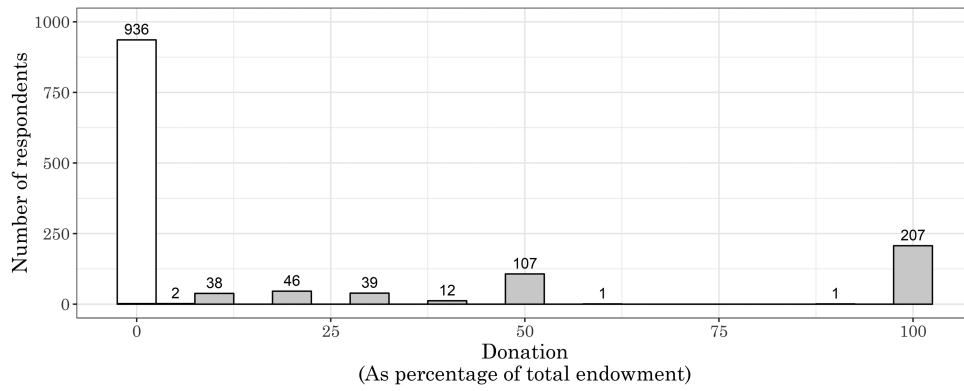


Figure 1. Pro-Social Donations in Survey Game (as Percent of Endowment).

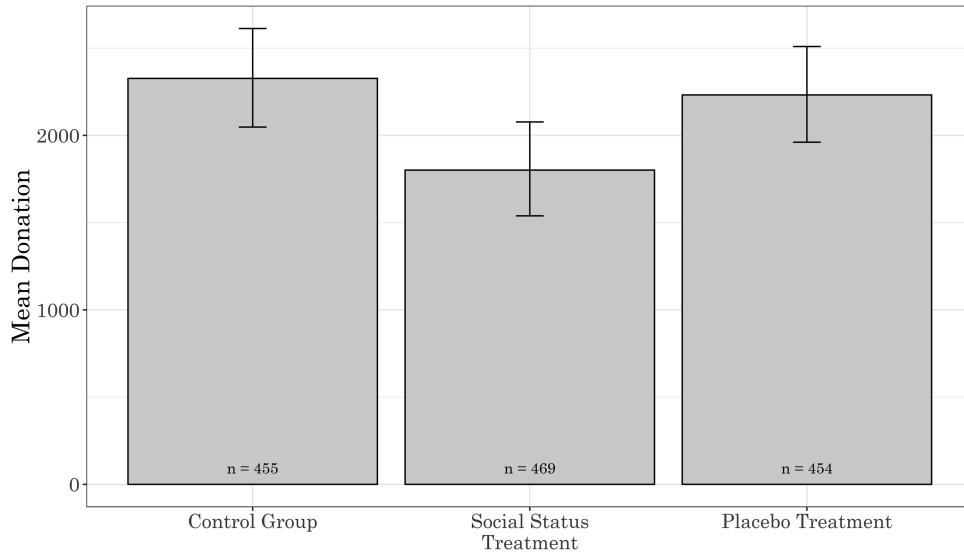


Figure 2. Pro-Social Donations: Social Status Treatment vs. Placebo Treatment vs. Control Group (with 95% Confidence Intervals).

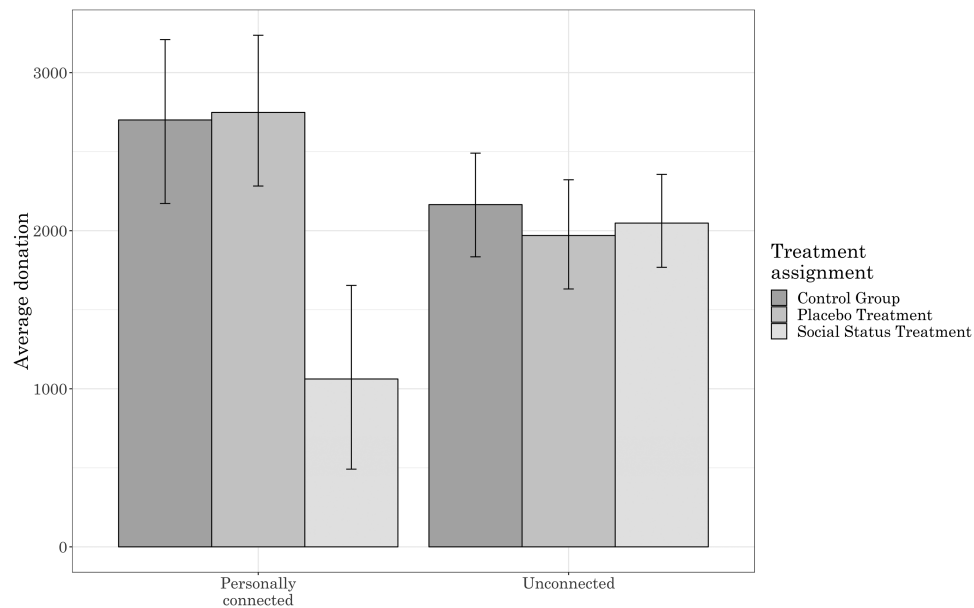


Figure 3. Treatment Effects on Pro-Social Donations Split by Whether Bureaucrats are Embedded in Patronage Networks (with 95% Confidence Intervals).

Table 1: Multiple Regression on Donation (Dichotomized Personal Connections)

	<i>Dependent variable: Donation</i>
Social Status Treatment	15.844 (281.250)
Placebo Treatment	1.656 (295.447)
Personal Connections	447.516 (386.702)
Social Status Treatment × Personal Connections	-1,432.296 (547.634) <i>p</i> = .009
Placebo Treatment x Personal Connections	221.980 (527.110)
Gender	247.057 (208.548)
University Education	-180.793 (293.780)
Years of Service	50.369 (13.884) <i>p</i> = .0003
Permanent Contract	239.679 (273.874)
High Income	820.392 (251.194) <i>p</i> = .001
Rank: Management	353.151 (365.612)
Ranke: Technical-Professional	162.477 (225.554)
Constant	1,246.933 (555.156) <i>p</i> = .025
Minister fixed effects	Yes
<i>n</i>	1,189
<i>N</i>	16
R-squared	0.142
Adjusted R-Squared	0.123
Residual Std. Error	3,375.952 (df = 1162)
F Statistic	7.382 (df = 26; 1162)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values reported for coefficients that reach conventional levels of significance.

(cf. Dahlstrom, Lapuente, and Teorell 2012; Oliveros and Schuster 2018), our results are robust to using a more comprehensive measure of patronage network embeddedness, which also accounts for connections for promotions. In particular, we asked respondents how important they expect connections with family, friends, and other personal acquaintances to be “to advance to a higher position in the public sector” (using the same response scale). This matters as connections that facilitated recruitment might not reflect current patronage network embeddedness of respondents. We then created an unweighted index that measures the importance of connections in recruitment and promotion within the civil service. Our results are robust to this alternative measurement of connections, and to using a measure of connections in promotions only (Supplementary Appendix Tables A11 and A12).

Further, our hypotheses suggest that being in a network should be the key factor driving pro-social behavior. However, it is possible that a more prominent position in government might be equally or more important, but this does not seem to be the case: rank does not moderate the prime treatment effect in our lab game (Supplementary Appendix Table A13).

And finally, as mentioned above, while the prime did lead most respondents to discuss their importance and high status, not all did. In fact, 41% did not speak directly about their importance in response to the prime (however, 30% possibly did so indirectly by speaking of their role in providing services to

Ugandans). We, therefore, estimated the difference of means tests reported in figures 2 and 3 but this time only including in the treatment sample those who directly complied with the treatment (the above-mentioned 59% of the treatment group). We also estimate the complier average treatment effect (CACE) for the full sample, those who are connected, and those who are not connected. These results are reported in Supplementary Appendix Table A14. In all cases, the results above hold: the treatment significantly reduces willingness to donate, and this effect is driven by those who are connected to patronage networks.

Discussion and Conclusion

Why is public service delivery by African states often particularist, favoring ethnic, personal or political networks of those inside the state over universalist, pro-social services to citizens? One scholarly response focuses on societal patronage norms, with “Big Men” providing state resources to the members of their networks rather than the public as a whole. Despite the prominence of this line of reasoning and the anecdotal prevalence of “Big Men” in African politics and society, hardly any research has quantitatively assessed the effects of “big man” rule inside the state.

Through a lab-in-the-field experiment with over 1,300 Ugandan bureaucrats, our article addresses part of this gap. In our experiment, we find that activating social status and importance—that is plausibly “big man” status—through a prime in bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks significantly curbs their pro-social behavior. Pro-social behavior of bureaucrats outside patronage networks, by contrast, remains unaffected by the social status prime.

Our article contributes an important empirical micro-foundation to help explain the limited universal service delivery by bureaucracies. It, in particular, suggests that bureaucrats replicate “big man” behavior of politicians: status matters to bureaucrats within patronage networks, and curbs their pro-social behavior towards groups outside their patronage networks.

The results also provide suggestive evidence to rethink some stereotypes surrounding African bureaucrats. In our sample, one-third of bureaucrats were willing to make monetary sacrifices for a pro-social cause, and 70% did not (indicate that they) obtain their public sector job through connections. They responded differently to the social status prime, contrary to connected bureaucrats that acted as “big men” in a way that impacts pro-social behavior and thus potentially universalistic service delivery. There is thus reason to believe that Uganda’s civil service contains within it a proportion of bureaucrats who are not (as deeply) embedded in patronage networks and seeking to provide universalistic and pro-social public services.

Our findings also suggest that limited universal pro-social behavior in African bureaucracies is not merely a function of incentives bureaucrats face vis-a-vis their political patrons. Our social status prime did not alter incentives of bureaucrats to (not) engage in pro-social behavior. Rather, the prime rendered salient social status—and plausibly “big man” status—of bureaucrats connected to patronage networks when making pro-social behavioral choices. From a social identity perspective (cf. Akerlof and Kranton 2000), our treatment could thus be interpreted as the activation of “big man” identities of bureaucrats in patronage networks. These identities curbed their

pro-social behavior towards groups outside their patronage networks. Our findings thus contribute to longstanding debates about the extent to which norms or incentives sustain clientelism in developing countries (cf. Lawson and Greene 2014). They also underscore, more generally, the utility of quantitative research on social identities and social norms in patronage state bureaucracies to understand service delivery and the state more generally—a topic which remains hitherto neglected in quantitative research.

For researchers of the state, our findings also point to the importance of studying status and prestige in bureaucracies. As noted in the literature review, bureaucratic status and prestige were central to classic Weberian accounts of pro-social bureaucratic behavior (Weber 1978). Nonetheless, however, these topics remain scarcely studied in quantitative public administration research. Our results show that social status can shape bureaucratic behavior, albeit—at least in one African country—in the opposite way that Weber (1978) had foreseen. For public administration scholars, our findings thus underscore the utility of studying the effects of status and prestige on bureaucratic behavior across countries to understand whether public sector organizations should promote, or de-emphasize, the social status and prestige of bureaucratic posts to promote pro-social behavior of bureaucrats.

Lastly, our findings also contribute more generally to the social psychology and economics literature on social status and pro-social behavior. As discussed above, whether social status enhances or curbs pro-social behavior remains contested in this literature. Our findings suggest diverging effects may be very much expected. At least in our sample of Ugandan bureaucrats, we found that whether social status curbs (or not) behavior that benefits the public as a whole depends on the networks of individuals. When individuals are embedded in a group network, we find that greater status is associated with less pro-social behavior towards the public as a whole. Pro-social behavior, for these bureaucrats, would benefit groups outside the individual's narrow network rather than helping the individual retain their status within their social group (in our case, the patronage network). Our article thus also contributes to the more general understanding of the relationship between social status and pro-social behavior in the social psychology and economics literatures.

While we believe our article thus makes important contributions to our understanding of states, bureaucratic social status, and the relationship between social status and pro-social behavior, several limitations remain and point to areas for future research.

First, our inferences are drawn from a lab-in-the-field experiment, rather than a field experiment. Bureaucrats connected to patronage networks reduce pro-social behavior in the lab in response to a social status prime. While prior studies suggest pro-social lab-in-the-field behavior by state agents predicts behavior in their organizations (Ashraf, Bandiera, and Lee 2014)—thus giving us some confidence in the external validity of our findings for behavior in the field—it remains for future studies to provide conclusive evidence that social status of bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks reduces their pro-social and universalist service delivery in the field—rather than only in the lab.

Second, our experiment only provided evidence for part of the puzzle of particularist service delivery: we can only show that bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks reduce their pro-social behavior towards groups outside their patronage

networks when primed about their social status—not that they increase their within-group favoritism towards members of their patronage networks. While our results thus show that social status reduces pro-social behavior of bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks, our results are only suggestive—but cannot directly show—that this is driven by bureaucratic “big man” behavior towards their network. As a result, whether social status not only reduces pro-social behavior of bureaucrats embedded in patronage networks, but also—in line with a “big man” logic—enhances their provision of particularist goods and services to members of their patronage network remains for future studies to show more conclusively.

Lastly, we drew our inferences from a broad range of central government bureaucrats in a single country. Studies suggest that “big man” and patronage norms often permeate societies across the continent (Cammack 2007; McCauley 2014; van de Walle 2001). It is thus plausible that our findings travel to other countries across the continent, not least given the magnitude of effects we identify for our social status prime in the case of Ugandan bureaucrats. Whether they do, however, remains for future replication studies to assess.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data is available at the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory online.

Data Availability

Date and replication materials are available here: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/F63VGK>.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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