CONTENTS

ONE **Introduction**

Status Concerns and Political Behavior

This book touches on three long-standing political ques-
tions: How do citizens evaluate public policies? Under
what conditions do governments act in service of their
constituents' material interests or fail to do so? Why (and under
what conditions) do citizens participate in politics? Each of these
questions is important in its own right. Together they cover much
of what politics is about: public opinion, policy implementation,
and political participation.

However, the focus of this book is not so much on any one
of these puzzles as it is on an insight about human psychology
that can help us address these three important political questions
and more. The insight is that people care about maintaining and
improving their social status within groups. This concern for status
comes in many forms: Envy is the inclination to bring down those
who are better off. Spite is the inclination to *keep* down those who
are worse off. The pursuit of admiration is the inclination to rise
in the ranks of others' opinions. Each of these impulses involves a
concern for a better *relative* position within the group, even if that
means costs to the self and to others. Some of these motivations
are considered ugly and undesirable, and others less so, but they
are all central components of human psychology. Every person
experiences them at some point in her life.

Many explanations of political behavior assume that citizens
are motivated by material group- or self-interests, or by broader
principles and ideological commitments. Such motivations are
undeniably important. Citizens vote at least in part based on

a desire to maximize their own material resources and physical safety,[1] and they support policies that protect their social identity groups relative to other groups.[2] Likewise, they participate in politics when the material and physical costs of doing so decrease and when doing so would make them materially better off.[3] They evaluate policies based on partisan commitments,[4] or according to general principles of compassion, fairness, and reciprocity.[5]

Yet scholars of politics should not overlook the ways that people are also motivated by the desire to distinguish themselves from others, particularly within groups. Social psychologists have observed that "one of the most important goals and outcomes of social life is to attain status in the groups to which we belong."[6] John Adams wrote that attaining such status "is as real a want of nature as hunger."[7] These authors join numerous social scientists who have observed the high value people place on achieving distinction within social groups. Within-group status brings

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[1] E.g., Daniel N. Posner. *Institutions and ethnic politics in Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2005; Beatriz Magaloni. *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[2] E.g., Evan S. Lieberman. *Boundaries of contagion: how ethnic politics have shaped government responses to AIDS*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

[3] E.g., Emmanuel Teitelbaum. *Mobilizing restraint: Democracy and industrial conflict in postreform south Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011; Xi Chen. *Social protest and contentious authoritarianism in China*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[4] E.g., James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus. "How elite partisan polarization affects public opinion formation." In *American Political Science Review* 107.01 (2013), pp. 57–79.

[5] E.g., Christina Fong. "Social preferences, self-interest, and the demand for redistribution." In *Journal of Public Economics* 82.2 (2001), pp. 225–246; Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage. *Taxing the rich: A history of fiscal fairness in the United States and Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016; Charlotte Cavaillé. "Demand for Redistribution in the Age of Inequality." PhD thesis. Harvard University, 2014.

[6] Cameron Anderson et al. "Who attains social status? Effects of personality and physical attractiveness in social groups." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81.1 (2001), p. 116.

[7] Charles Francis Adams. *The works of John Adams*. Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1850, p. 234.

pleasure and a sense of personal power,[8] and is more closely linked to self-reports of well being than many measures of absolute welfare.[9] It informs self-judgment when absolute benchmarks are not otherwise available, as is often the case.[10] Occupying a high within-group status makes people feel good, whatever their absolute circumstances, and, as a result, people sometimes make real sacrifices to preserve or elevate their status.[11]

This book explores how concerns about within-group status shed light on political attitudes and behavior. Although political theorists and researchers in other social sciences have written about envy, spite, and the desire for admiration, within-group status motivations have received little empirical attention in political science.[12] Political scientists have certainly paid attention to emotions (especially fear, anger, and enthusiasm),[13] but emotions related to within-group status have largely been overlooked.

[8] Cameron Anderson et al. "The local-ladder effect: Social status and subjective well-being." In *Psychological Science* 23.7 (2012), pp. 764–771.

[9] Christopher J. Boyce, Gordon D. A. Brown, and Simon C. Moore. "Money and happiness: Rank of income, not income, affects life satisfaction." In *Psychological Science* 21.4 (2010), pp. 471–475.

[10] Leon Festinger. "A theory of social comparison processes." In *Human Relations* 7.2 (1954), pp. 117–140; Susan T. Fiske. *Envy up, scorn down: How status divides us*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011; Robert H. Frank. *Choosing the right pond: Human behavior and the quest for status*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985.

[11] Yoram Weiss and Chaim Fershtman. "Social status and economic performance: A survey." In *European Economic Review* 42.3 (1998), pp. 801–820.

[12] A recent exception is Jonathan Renshon. *Fighting for status: Hierarchy and conflict in world politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, which looks at foreign policy elites' concern for status in international relations, and the implications of these concerns for inter-state conflict.

[13] For examples, see Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian. *Anxious politics: Democratic citizenship in a threatening world*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Antoine J. Banks. *Anger and racial politics: The emotional foundation of racial attitudes in America*. Cambridge University Press, 2014; Nicholas A. Valentino et al. "Is a worried citizen a good citizen? Emotions, political information seeking, and learning via the internet." In *Political Psychology* 29.2 (2008), pp. 247–273; Ted Brader. *Campaigning for hearts and minds: How emotional appeals in political ads work*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006; and George E. Marcus. "Emotions in politics." In *Annual Review of Political Science* 3.1 (2000), pp. 221–250, on these emotions.

A rich literature on ethnic and racial politics has taken seriously people's concern for their group's relative position vis-à-vis other groups[14] and studied the emotions that stem from such concerns,[15] but that literature has focused less on individuals' striving for distinction *within* groups or on the political consequences thereof. More recent studies have found that invoking social comparisons can influence voter turnout,[16] and at least one study of distributive attitudes highlights individuals' dislike of being relatively worse off than others,[17] but, given the level of attention that status motivations have received in other social sciences, the insights of these exceptional studies deserve further exploration and application in political science.

This book therefore takes a closer look at the political implications of within-group status motivations, paying particular attention to the influence of envy, spite, and the desire for admiration on politics. It first combines insights from political theory, behavioral economics, psychology, and anthropology to develop a framework for anticipating when and how status motivations might influence political attitudes and behavior. It then applies

[14] E.g., Lars-Erik Cederman, Nils B. Weidmann, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. "Horizontal inequalities and ethnonationalist civil war: A global comparison." In *American Political Science Review* 105.03 (2011), pp. 478–495; Evan Lieberman. *Boundaries of contagion: How ethnic politics have shaped government responses to AIDS*; Henri Tajfel. "Social psychology of intergroup relations." In *Annual Review of Psychology* 33.1 (1982), pp. 1–39.

[15] See in particular Roger D. Petersen. *Understanding ethnic violence: Fear, hatred, and resentment in twentieth-century Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2002, for a discussion of inter-group resentment.

[16] Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer. "Social pressure and voter turnout: Evidence from a large-scale field experiment." In *American Political Science Review* 102.01 (2008), pp. 33–48; Costas Panagopoulos. "Affect, social pressure and prosocial motivation: Field experimental evidence of the mobilizing effects of pride, shame and publicizing voting behavior." In *Political Behavior* 32.3 (2010), pp. 369–386.

[17] Xiaobo Lü and Kenneth Scheve. "Self-centered inequity aversion and the mass politics of taxation." In *Comparative Political Studies* 49.14 (2016), pp. 1965–1997. Rather than highlight status motivations per se, Lü and Scheve explore the possibility of "self-centered inequity aversion" which involves citizens wanting to be neither worse off *nor* better off than others.

that framework to a series of political puzzles to see if status motivations help us explain more than we could relying on existing theories of the drivers of political behavior alone. The goal is not to prove that status motivations account for *all* political behavior, or even that they are the most important determinant of political behavior in each case. Rather, the goal is to explore whether status motivations give us additional explanatory leverage over important political questions and enrich our understanding of disparate domains of political behavior.

To be sure, there are at least three reasons that empirical political scientists might have hesitated to study status motivations. But each of these can be overcome. First, it might seem improbable that the concern for status—a fundamental and universal feature of human nature—could explain variation in political behavior.[18] But while envy and other status motivations may be regular features of human experience, the evidence suggests that there is variation in how often these concerns affect *political* opinions and behaviors. For instance, anthropological studies, some of which I discuss below, convincingly illustrate that status concerns are often addressed informally, with no need for the involvement of political processes or institutions. For example, groups establish norms for concealing advantages most likely to excite envy[19] and develop social practices to encourage people to display goodwill

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[18] Indeed, an earlier literature on relative deprivation—the motivation to make demands on government because one is worse off than others—ran into difficulty because it seemed that relative deprivation was much too prevalent a phenomena to account for variation in political engagement. See Joan Neff Gurney and Kathleen J. Tierney. "Relative deprivation and social movements: A critical look at twenty years of theory and research." In *Sociological Quarterly* 23.1 (1982), pp. 33–47.

[19] As I discuss below, these practices are found throughout the world in both developing and developed countries. They include social conventions for limiting conspicuous consumption, demonstrating modesty about personal accomplishments, and avoiding outpacing other group members. See Jean-Philippe Platteau. "Redistributive pressures in Sub-Saharan Africa: Causes, consequences, and coping strategies." In *Africa's development in historical perspective*. Ed. by Emmanuel Akyeampong et al. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 153–207.

rather than spite toward the less fortunate.[20] These informal mechanisms for managing status motivations are strongest when people know each other well, and when times are relatively "settled," to use Swidler's term.[21] Under such conditions, social rules are relatively uncontested. People can learn which disparities are most likely to excite envy and spite, utilize established mechanisms for conferring admiration, and follow established social practices for managing status conflict without demanding that policies and political institutions do it for them. By contrast, in "unsettled" times,[22] when social conventions for managing status motivations are weak, there are no longer strong rules for addressing status motivations without help from policies and political institutions. Since status motivations are most likely to shape political preferences and actions under these conditions, we can use this insight to better account for variation in political behavior.

A second reason that political scientists might have hesitated to examine status motivations is that they are sometimes hidden. Many status motivations, particularly envy and spite, are antisocial since they involve wishing that others had less.[23] Other status motivations—like the desire for admiration—are not antisocial per se, but people may feign that they are not a priority.[24]

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[20] Practices for mitigating envy and spite could also include "feeling rules" that define when and where it is socially appropriate to experience envy and spite and when and where it is instead best to suppress it: Arlie R. Hochschild. *The managed heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983.

[21] Ann Swidler. "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies." In *American Sociological Review* (1986), pp. 273–286.

[22] Swidler defined "unsettled times" as periods of "social transformation" when "people are learning new ways of organizing individual and collective action, practicing unfamiliar habits until they become familiar." See ibid., p. 278. In other words, they are periods during which social rules and practices that were previously taken for granted become contested and reworked. In the applications section of this book, I consider the period just after the transition from apartheid as one example of a time when communities within South Africa were experiencing "unsettled times," though to varying degrees.

[23] Benedikt Herrmann, Christian Thöni, and Simon Gächter. "Antisocial punishment across societies." In *Science* 319.5868 (2008), pp. 1362–1367.

[24] Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit. *The economy of esteem: An essay on civil and political society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Thus, people may report status motivations less often than they report other concerns. They may even use other labels when describing their own feelings, perhaps saying that rather than envying others, they are concerned about "fairness."[25] But the fact that status motivations may not be reliably self-reported does not mean that we cannot identify their observable implications in political attitudes and actions apart from self-reports.[26] As I discuss in greater detail below, concerns about within-group status manifest when people self-centeredly try to avoid disadvantageous inequality for themselves and try to preserve advantageous inequality for themselves. The observable implications are thus distinct from those of prosocial motivations (which would not lead to preserving advantageous inequality) and from those of broader fairness principles (which would not be so self-centered), even if individuals might claim otherwise. We can look for these observable implications in attitudinal, observational, and experimental data.

Third, political scientists may have hesitated to examine status motivations because they seemed too close to self-interest. Since within-group status is sometimes associated with material benefits (economic opportunity, influence), the observable implications of status-motivated behavior may seem to be indistinguishable from the pursuit of absolute material welfare, especially over the long term. Indeed, in early human societies, high status within small groups may have guaranteed mating partners as well as control over resources;[27] in other words our concerns about within-group status may have functional, evolutionary origins. Yet, regardless of the origins of status motivations, concerns about within-group

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[25] Paul Hoggett, Hen Wilkinson, and Phoebe Beedell. "Fairness and the politics of resentment." In *Journal of Social Policy* 42 (July 3, 2013), pp. 567–585. I further discuss the conceptual distinctions between envy, spite, and fairness below, as well as in the Elaborations chapter of the book.

[26] Rational choice research does not usually require actors to articulate the costs and benefits of a particular action explicitly—only that they act as if they had.

[27] Steven R. H. Beach and Abraham Tesser. "Self-evaluation maintenance and evolution." In *Handbook of social comparison: Theory and research*. Ed. by Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler. New York, NY: Springer, 2000, pp. 123–140; Weiss and Fershtman, "Social status and economic performance: A survey."

status have become so hardwired in our psychology that today we pursue them even when doing so might not incur material benefits in either the short or long term.[28] This book focuses specifically on instances in which the empirical implications of within-group status motivations diverge from those of material self-interest.

Each of the applications in this book begins with questions about why some people's political attitudes and behaviors diverge from their material interests. Why do some citizens support taxation and redistribution policies that are personally costly to them? Why do some governments fail to implement funded policies that would make constituents materially better off? Why do citizens contribute their time and energy to collective political action instead of free-riding off of the efforts of others? While taking other variables—state capacity, people's social identities, their concerns for fairness and risk, their party affiliations and larger ideas about what government should do—into account helps a great deal, unexplained variation remains.

A close look at the observable implications of status motivations gives us additional leverage over these questions. A citizen's puzzling opposition to redistribution policies that would put more money in her pocket is explained in part by the fact that the policy at issue would benefit her neighbors even more and thus reduce her local status. Policies that are generally welfare enhancing may be stymied because politicians perceive that citizens do not want policies that advantage others, even though they would benefit, too. In the domain of contentious politics, participation may be individually costly but promise higher within-group status to some, drawing those people into the fray. In all of these examples, if we allow that people sometimes prioritize status over other interests and principles, we can use variation in who faces these trade-offs, along with insights about the conditions under which

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[28] David M. Buss. "Evolutionary biology and personality psychology: Toward a conception of human nature and individual differences." In *American Psychologist* 39.10 (1984), pp. 1135–1147.

status motivations become politically salient, to explain more about puzzling political behavior than we otherwise could.

I use the terms "status motivations" or "status concerns" throughout the book rather than "status emotions." The book focuses specifically on the influence of envy, spite, and the desire for admiration on the goals people pursue—on the things they want from political activity and from public policies.[29] I thus use the term "status motivations" rather than "status emotions" to make clear this particular focus. Status emotions also perform other functions that I do not discuss. For instance, status emotions can provide information to the self and to others ("affect-as-information"),[30] and can influence information processing and belief formation.[31] I return to a discussion of these other functions in the conclusion.

The evidence in the book comes primarily from two countries—the United States and South Africa. I chose these countries because at first glance both seemed unlikely places for

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[29] The arguments in this book need not contradict rational choice theories. Rational choice models are compatible with a variety of goals. Much of political science research has focused on other goals, such as the desire to maximize absolute economic well-being and to retain the material benefits of office, and the desire to enact particular policies for the good of others or for principled reasons. This book suggests that we also consider an additional goal: maintaining and enhancing within-group status.

[30] Conor M. Steckler and Jessica L. Tracy. "The emotional underpinnings of social status." In *The psychology of social status*. Ed. by Joey T. Cheng and Jessica L. Tracy. New York, NY: Springer, 2014, pp. 201–224. The authors outline several ways in which the experience and display of status emotions sends information to the person experiencing the emotions about his/her status and conveys this information to others. For instance, experiencing envy or shame not only motivates a person to pursue a higher status within her group; it also communicates to the person that he/she is in a lower-status position. Furthermore, the person's (often unconscious) display of these emotions (e.g., lowering of the head or hunching of the shoulders to denote shame) communicates to others that she is in a low-status position.

[31] Christopher Oveis, Elizabeth J. Horberg, and Dacher Keltner. "Compassion, pride, and social intuitions of self-other similarity." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98.4 (2010), pp. 618–630. The authors found that people experiencing pride processed information in ways that led them to perceive themselves as even higher status than they were.

within-group status concerns to matter. Narratives of individual enrichment are strong enough in the United States that they might undermine any desire for within-group status at the expense of personal fortune. The American Dream is that all individuals, if they work hard enough, can "make it." This narrative accomplishes two things. First, it elevates absolute wealth above all other goals. Second, it implies that if a person simply works hard enough, he can rise to the top of the economic hierarchy. He should not need to cut others down in the process. The book also looks at South African politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s, soon after the transition from apartheid that removed barriers to power and fortune for a majority of South Africans. Other scholars have predicted that such transitions leave a warm glow, at least for a little while.[32] According to this logic, citizens should be so heartened by seeing others like them succeed that they refrain from competing for within-group status. For this reason, early post-apartheid South African politics also seem an unlikely place to find a strong influence of within-group status concerns on political behavior. Both countries have histories of severely racist institutions and racial segregation that have strengthened perceptions of linked fate among members of the same races and ethnicities.[33] Although within-group inequalities are real and pervasive in both countries, political rhetoric has often focused on differences and inequalities between groups, masking inequalities within them. As a result, one might not generally expect US or South African citizens to compete with other group members for status, especially not at the expense of their own material welfare or that of their group.

[32] Albert O. Hirschman and Michael Rothschild. "The changing tolerance for income inequality in the course of economic development." In *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87.4 (1973), pp. 544–566.

[33] Michael C. Dawson. *Behind the mule: Race and class in African-American politics*. Princeton University Press, 1994; Martin Gilens. *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009; Donald L. Horowitz. *A democratic South Africa?: Constitutional engineering in a divided society*. Vol. 46. University of California Press, 1991; Anthony W. Marx. *Making race and nation: A comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

While the two countries share attributes that provide tough tests for theory, they also differ in important respects. Both countries are democracies, where citizens' motivations and actions are most likely to have an observable effect on public policy and governance patterns. Yet one has been a democracy for some time, while the other's democracy is newer; one has an advanced industrialized economy, while the other is newly industrialized and considered a developing country by some. Some scholars have argued that status concerns affect behavior only in very rich industrialized democracies, where people have moved beyond worrying about basic resources on a daily basis.[34] The evidence in this book suggests otherwise. Examining these two countries together helps to focus on how status motivations are features of the human experience rather than markers of particular societies.

This book joins other work that seeks to integrate the complexities of human psychology into our understanding of comparative political behavior. Alongside scholarship on social identities, prosocial motivations, and cognitive biases, among other subjects, this book suggests ways to move beyond "homoeconomicus" assumptions that political actors are primarily concerned with material self-interest. My goals are to enrich our descriptions of political behavior and to explore whether (and how) insights about status motivations give us analytic purchase over important puzzles in politics.

DEFINITIONS

Before combining insights from political theory and other social sciences to further develop the main arguments, a discussion of key concepts is in order. As a category, status motivations all involve doing well relative to other people on some socially valued

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[34] Andrew E. Clark, Paul Frijters, and Michael A. Shields. "Relative income, happiness, and utility: An explanation for the Easterlin paradox and other puzzles." In *Journal of Economic Literature* 46.1 (2008), pp. 95–144.

dimension of income, assets, attributes, actions, or achievements. Status can be assessed on many dimensions, but I focus here on two: an economic one and an attitudinal one. People might enjoy occupying a higher relative economic position: earning more money, owning more property, or having more material possessions compared to members of their social groups. But they might also desire to be highly regarded, to enjoy a high place in the opinion of others. I bundle both of these desires together as examples of status motivations.[35] I assume that when human beings pursue status goods, they do so rationally[36] and that they generally care about both their rank compared to others and the disparities between themselves and others. That is, I assume that people care about their relative position in both an ordinal and a cardinal sense.[37]

Status motivations can be further disaggregated into specific components. For instance, envy is a status motivation that is felt specifically in response to "upward comparisons"—that is, when a person is worse off than others in her group. Of course, colloquially, the word "envy" is used in many different ways.[38] But I use the term here specifically to indicate a feeling of hostility

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[35] Since this study provides a first cut at whether status motivations influence political attitudes and behavior, for simplicity, I treat income and admiration here largely as independent dimensions on which within-group status can be measured. However, in some contexts, higher levels of income may denote competence and thus also bestow admiration upon an individual, or the pursuit of relative income and the pursuit of admiration may be linked.

[36] As discussed above, one could also explore how status motivations distort rationality. In *Othello*, for instance, Shakespeare writes, "Trifles light as air seem to the jealous confirmation strong as proofs from holy writ." That is, status motivations like jealousy may also distort how we process information or perceive the intentions of others. This line of exploration should be pursued in future research but is beyond the scope of this book.

[37] Daniel John Zizzo and Andrew J. Oswald. "Are people willing to pay to reduce others' incomes?" In *Annales d'Economie et de Statistique* (2001), pp. 39–65; Colin Camerer. *Behavioral game theory: Experiments in strategic interaction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.

[38] Colloquially, it is used to mean anything from a vague or benign wish to have what someone else has ("I envy your trip to the Bahamas!") to a desire to see someone else harmed. See Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*.

toward the greater success of others—a wish for those with more to have less,[39] even if that would mean few benefits (or even negative consequences) for the envier. Envy is thus only one type of concern for relative, rather than absolute, welfare. A related emotion, spite, is felt specifically in response to "downward comparisons"—that is, in response to others who are worse off. Spite is a wish for those with less to continue to have less, or to become even worse off, relatively speaking.[40] In other words, it is a wish to preserve or improve one's relative position. Like envy, spite is an antisocial motivation that seeks to improve one's own status by ensuring that others have less.[41] But not all status motivations are explicitly antisocial. For instance, the desire for admiration represents the wish to occupy a high status in the opinion of others.[42] It is a desire for social distinction in an attitudinal sense, to be seen as more estimable than others are. While it does not necessarily involve a wish for others to become less well off materially, it, too, entails a concern for one's relative position. These are the status motivations discussed in this book.[43]

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[39] The goods in question might be "positional" in the sense that their value stems from their ranking relative to alternatives, but they need not be: Fred Hirsch. *Social limits to growth*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1976. A house provides shelter against bad weather, which is valuable to an individual even if others do not also desire the house. Nevertheless, a person may experience envy when seeing others occupying houses. See Fiske. *Envy up, scorn down: How status divides us*, chapter 3, for evidence that individuals compare status on the basis of non-positional goods such as health, marriage quality, depression, and risks of accidents.

[40] Ernst Fehr, Karla Hoff, and Mayuresh Kshetramade. "Spite and development." In *American Economic Review* 98.2 (2008), pp. 494–499.

[41] Herrmann, Thöni, and Simon Gächter. "Antisocial punishment across societies."

[42] Brennan and Pettit. *The economy of esteem: An essay on civil and political society*.

[43] Other examples of status motivations include shame (the painful feeling when one performs or behaves in a manner that is disesteemed by others), schadenfreude (the pleasure at seeing someone envied brought low), and vanity (the overestimation of one's own achievements relative to others). These motivations deserve further exploration in future research but are beyond the scope of this study. On schadenfreude, see Mina Cikara. "Intergroup schadenfreude: Motivating participation in collective violence." In *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 3 (2015), pp. 12–17.

As discussed above, status motivations can be difficult to measure through self-reports. People rarely admit that they want to see others made worse off just to increase their own status. Even in the case of the desire for admiration, people may sometimes deny that their actions are influenced by wanting the esteem of others rather than by other goals.[44] However, status-motivated behavior does have distinctive markers, and people can still discern envy, spite, or the desire for esteem as motivations for the behavior of others just by their body language. There are even studies of the subtle (and automatic) facial cues that signal when someone experiences envy or spite.[45] While I describe status motivations in terms of inner feelings and desires, their analytic usefulness does not depend on self-reports. The antecedents and behavioral manifestations of status motivations can be used to explain political patterns.

The behavioral markers of status motivations also help differentiate them from other concepts in political science, such as fairness, inequality aversion, and social pressure.[46] I further discuss

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[44] For instance, Elster (1983) worries that admiration is subject to a teleological paradox, according to the old adage "nothing is so unimpressive as behavior that is designed to impress" (quoted in Brennan and Pettit, *The economy of esteem: An essay on civil and political society*, p. 36). The worry is that people may admire people's actions and traits unless those actions are openly motivated by the desire to win admiration. While these concerns may be valid, this research reveals that people act on explicit promises that their political actions will be admired by in-group members.

[45] See Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*, pp. 36–42, for one discussion.

[46] The concept of relative deprivation, which was an important variable in earlier political science research, particularly on rebellion, is perhaps closest to the concept of status motivations discussed here: Ted Robert Gurr. *Why men rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970. Relative deprivation refers to the discontent people feel when they are worse off than others, or when there is a disjuncture between people's expectations and the reality of their circumstances: Walter Garrison Runciman. *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth-century England*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966; Gurney and Tierney, "Relative deprivation and social movements: A critical look at twenty years of theory and research." I discuss the distinction between relative deprivation and status motivations in the Elaborations chapter. One difference is that relative deprivation scholarship focused on how relative deprivation motivated people to try to demand more for themselves in

these conceptual distinctions in the Elaborations chapter of the book, but it is important to remember that when a person is influenced by status motivations, she responds to the differences between what *she* has and what others have, and between how *she* is seen and how others are seen, and she then behaves in ways that are intended to increase those differences in her favor. In other words, she is concerned about her own status—about decreasing inequality that is disadvantageous for her—not about reducing inequality in general and not about ensuring that all people are treated according to standardized principles. She is striving for *distinction*, not simply trying to conform to the average behavior of others. Of course, all of these various concerns—for status, for fairness, for conforming to norms—are likely to influence the political opinions and behaviors of a given person at some point in her life. The focus here on status motivations does not suggest that other concerns never shape political behavior. Rather, I argue that we can use insights about the antecedents and consequences of envy and other status motivations in conjunction with these other motivations in order to gain a richer and deeper understanding of political behavior.

In the next section, I draw on other disciplines and authors to gather insights about the nature of status motivations, the conditions under which they are most salient, and the consequences they tend to have. Doing so helps me formulate expectations about when (and how) status motivations might influence political behavior.

Origins of the Argument

The argument in this book draws inspiration from the writings of political theorists and the empirical research of behavioral economists, psychologists, and anthropologists. This section briefly discusses relevant ideas and findings from these literatures in order to

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absolute terms. This book focuses on the effects of people's concerns about relative position itself.

construct a framework for thinking about the potential effects of status motivations on political behavior.

I use findings from these other disciplines in the following ways. From both political theory and behavioral economics, I draw the insight that envy and other status motivations are pervasive and distinguishable from considerations of material self-interest, as well as from other common distributive preferences, such as a concern for fairness. Political theorists suggest in general terms that envy, spite, and the quest for admiration might alter politics by introducing motivations that are contrary to the pursuit of basic material interests. Behavioral economists then go further to demonstrate empirically that people are willing to pay personal costs and to diverge from fairness principles to improve their status within groups. I then use insights from behavioral economics, psychology, and anthropology studies to consider the conditions under which status motivations are likely to motivate political behavior, and the groups within which people are likely to gauge their own status. Research in psychology tells us that comparisons among similar people are those that most often give rise to status concerns; that is, status comparisons are most intense among neighbors, coethnics, coworkers, and friends. Behavioral economics research underscores that visible disparities to which we are frequently exposed provoke envy and spite. And research in anthropology suggests that when social ties are weak and during times of transition, status motivations are less well addressed through nonpolitical mechanisms. They are thus likely to result in more political forms of conflict. These insights about the conditions under which status motivations are (1) provoked and (2) likely to spill over into politics are key for explaining variation in political behavior.

POLITICAL THEORY

The political theory literature uses multiple terms to describe status motivations. For instance, Rousseau refers to *amour-propre*, and

Hobbes discusses the competition for honor and dignity. Rawls uses the term "envy" explicitly, as do Aristotle, Mill, Tocqueville, and Smith. Grant describes "status passions," a category in which she includes vanity, pride, envy, jealousy, and the desire for honor and glory.[47] Yet these thinkers agree that people care about their relative position, often for its own sake. From varying perspectives and with varying degrees of detail, they argue that this concern can affect people's political attitudes and actions.

For instance, in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*, Rousseau distinguishes between two kinds of self-love or self-concern—*amour-de-soi* and *amour-propre*.[48] The first focuses on self-preservation, basic needs, and material interests. Human beings want to survive: they seek security and material welfare—the kinds of goals we take for granted in contemporary empirical political science. The second, potentially more troublesome, kind of self-love (amour-propre) focuses on distinction from others: it is rooted in social comparison.[49] Amour-propre is the desire to be better than other people—to be recognized as such, and even to sacrifice in order to harm others so that one can surpass them in relative terms. Therefore, amour-propre can be troublingly destructive. It can be punishing to others and, paradoxically, to the self.

Hobbes also writes about the human tendency to be concerned with relative position. In *Leviathan* he explains that humans are

[47] Grant defines status passions as "those that aim at distinction or recognition relative to others": Ruth W. Grant. "Passions and interests revisited: the psychological foundations of economics and politics." In *Public Choice* 137.3-4 (2008), p. 453.

[48] Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987.

[49] As Kolodny writes, even if amour-de-soi can be comparative as well, it is comparative in a different sense: "Perhaps all forms of self-concern, such as concern for one's health, are desires that one's actual condition compare well with certain *possible* conditions, which someone, oneself or another, might enjoy. But amour-propre is a 'comparative' desire, whereas the desire for health is 'absolute,' in the stricter sense that it is a desire that one's actual condition compare well with the *actual* conditions of others." Niko Kolodny. "The Explanation of Amour-Propre." In *Philosophical Review* 119.2 (2010), pp. 165–200, p. 169.

different from animals, in part, because other creatures "have no other direction than their particular judgments and appetites," whereas:

> Men are continually in competition for honour and dignity… and consequently amongst men there ariseth on that ground, envy and hatred, and finally war.… *Man, whose joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent.*[50]

In other words, the concern for distinction from others is uniquely human. While other animals are driven by appetites for survival and basic needs,[51] man goes further: he also desires to be distinguished, even if that means conflict. In a way, man's politics arise precisely from these relative position concerns. While other social animals can live fairly peacefully without a common power, the competition among humans for honor and dignity often forces them to submit to a governing authority in order to avoid being in a constant state of war.

To be sure, the distinction between self-interest and this concern for eminence is blurrier for Hobbes than it is for Rousseau.[52] For Hobbes, the pursuit of relative position can be entangled with the pursuit of long-term self-interest, an alternative account of status motivations to which I return in the "Elaborations" chapter of the book. Only by exceeding others in all things (property, physical strength, and reputation) can an individual be assured that others

[50] Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, part 2, chapter 17, emphasis added

[51] We know now from studies of both chimpanzees and dogs that other animals actually also exhibit status motivations. See, for example, Friederike Range et al. "The absence of reward induces inequity aversion in dogs." In *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106.1 (2009), pp. 340–345; and Sarah F. Brosnan, Hillary C. Schiff, and Frans B. M. de Waal. "Tolerance for inequity may increase with social closeness in chimpanzees." In *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 272.1560 (2005), pp. 253–258.

[52] Grant. "Passions and interests revisited: the psychological foundations of economics and politics."

will not destroy him or her in the future. But Hobbes acknowledges that status motivations sometimes diverge from long-term interests. For instance, human beings desire social distinction even after their deaths, despite the fact that "after death, there be no sense of the praise given us on earth."[53] Although social status after one's death clearly serves no instrumental purpose, Hobbes recognizes that it is still valued: "Men have present delight therein, from the foresight of it . . . which though they now see not, yet they imagine; and any thing that is pleasure to the sense, the same also is pleasure in the imagination."[54] Hobbes concedes that humans sometimes pursue a higher relative position for its own sake, even when doing so incurs no material benefits.

Drawing on the works of Rousseau and Hobbes, Grant urges political scientists and policy makers not to ignore what she calls "status passions":

> A political order that succeeds in impartially adjudicating interests and providing for economic security and growth, difficult as this may be, will have done only part of the job. . . . The notion that such a political order has completed the job is the source of dangerous blindness. Politics must allow somehow for the satisfaction of desires for distinction. . . . It must contend with anger and ambition, hatred, envy and contempt. . . . A successful political order cannot afford to ignore any of the full array of human passions and purposes.[55]

Grant reminds us that these sorts of concerns give rise to social interactions that can be more deeply conflictual than the simple pursuit of interest. "People will choose to hurt a rival, rather than

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[53] See also Brennan and Pettit. *The economy of esteem: An essay on civil and political society*.

[54] Hobbes. *Leviathan*, part 1, chapter 11.

[55] Grant. "Passions and interests revisited: The psychological foundations of economics and politics," p. 476.

to attain the original object of their desire," she writes.[56] "Amour-propre leads people to seek satisfaction, not in their own benefit, but rather in harming others."[57] Thus understanding politics means grappling with status motivations, too.

Other thinkers have also discussed status motivations. For instance, Rawls writes of envy as "the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others.... We envy persons whose situation is superior to ours .... and we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits *even if* it is necessary to give up something ourselves."[58] Both Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill discuss envy explicitly in *Democracy in America* and *On Liberty*, respectively.[59] Tocqueville describes those who are envious: "There is no superiority...not irksome in their sight."[60] Mill calls envy "that most anti-social and odious of all passions"[61] and places it among the moral vices that must be regulated because they "involve a breach of duty to others."[62] Here, again, concerns about one's relative position are treated as distinct motivations that are different from both self-interest and prosocial other-regarding preferences. These thinkers acknowledge that status concerns are sometimes important and powerful enough to require government intervention.

Even Adam Smith, while dismissing some status motivations, underscores others. In *The Wealth of Nations* he acknowledges antisocial status emotions like envy and spite but speculates that they may not be terribly consequential. "Envy, malice or resentment, are the only passions which can prompt one man

[56] Ibid., p. 454.

[57] Ibid., p. 459.

[58] John Rawls. *A theory of justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971, 532, emphasis added. He goes on, "So understood envy is collectively disadvantageous: the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that make them both worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced."

[59] Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Trans by Henry Reeve. New York, NY: Adlard and Saunders, 1838; John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[60] Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, book 1, chapter 13.

[61] Mill. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. p. 87.

[62] Ibid.

to injure another.... But the greater part of men are not very frequently under the influence of those passions, and the very worst men are so only occasionally. As their gratification too, how agreeable soever it may be to certain characters, is not attended with any real or permanent advantage it is in the greater part of men commonly restrained by prudential considerations."[63] On the one hand, Smith here recognizes the distinction between envy and self-interest, noting that envy's satisfaction is "not attended with any real or permanent advantage." On the other hand, he speculates that for this reason, envy (and presumably spite) will be overridden in many people by more "prudential considerations."[64] But while Smith downplays antisocial status motivations in *The Wealth of Nations*,[65] he highlights human beings' desire for admiration in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which he emphasizes the desire for "favorable regard" as an end in itself:

> Nature, when she formed man for society, ... taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. She rendered their approbation most flattering and most agreeable to him *for its own sake*.[66]

Human beings have a basic desire to achieve distinction in the eyes of others, and to actually live up to that distinction (not just appear to), according to Smith. They have a desire for this kind of status, even when it does not bring other benefits. Thus, even Smith, who is often considered the paramount writer about self-interest in politics and the economy, gives space and attention to status motivations.

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[63] Adam Smith. *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations.* Ed. by Edwin Cannan. London, 1904, p. V.1.45

[64] As I discuss below, behavioral economics studies suggest that Smith is wrong here.

[65] *The wealth of nations* focuses on the relationship between self-interest and the public interest. That Smith downplays the importance of motivations that are contrary to self-interest in this work may be no coincidence.

[66] Adam Smith. *The theory of moral sentiments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 116, emphasis added.

Several political theory texts thus make clear that status motivations are (1) different from material self-interest and (2) help explain political behavior.[67] However, to my knowledge, few political theorists note that the quest for status is often parochial—that is, that it most often happens locally and within groups.[68] An exception is Aristotle, who argues that envy is more likely among social peers and intimates. In *On Rhetoric* he writes:

> We envy those who are near us in time, place, age or reputation.... We do not compare with men who lived a hundred centuries ago ... or those who dwell near the Pillars of Hercules, or those whom, in our opinion or that of others, we take to be far below or far above us.[69]

In other words, in Aristotle's view, comparisons among social and economic peers, rather than cross-class comparisons, are the most salient. As I discuss below, much modern social science research supports this understanding of status motivations, and it is an important insight for teasing out the observable implications of status motivations in political behavior.

Political theorists also seldom offer clear guidance on the conditions under which status motivations are more likely to be inflamed, or, more important, the conditions under which

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[67] While political theorists contend that envy helps us understand politics as it *is*, some warn against using it to inform our notion of how politics *ought to be*. A good example is Rawls, who spends the better part of a chapter in *A theory of justice* trying to prove that his notion of justice as fairness is *not* derived from human beings' propensity for envy: Rawls. *A theory of justice*, chapter 8, sect. 80. I will briefly discuss these normative concerns later in the book.

[68] For instance, for Rousseau, amour-propre entails global comparisons: it is the desire to be recognized as superior by *all* others. See Kolodny. "The explanation of amour-propre." p. 171. Similarly, Rawls describes envy as cross-class hostility—a feeling of the disadvantaged toward the most advantaged, the mega-rich: Jeffrey Edward Green. "Rawls and the forgotten figure of the most advantaged: In defense of reasonable envy toward the superrich." In *American Political Science Review* 107.01 (2013), pp. 123–138.

[69] Aristotle. *Complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation*. Trans. by Jonathan Barnes. Vol. 1. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, book 10.

status motivations are likely to be a force in politics specifically. One exception is Tocqueville, who argues that in times of great change, men care most about the disparities between themselves and others. In these times, a concern for status "swells to the height of fury":

> This occurs at the moment when the old social system, long menaced, completes its own destruction ... and when the barriers of rank are at length thrown down. . . . Tell them not that by this blind surrender of themselves to an exclusive passion they *risk their dearest interests*: they are deaf.[70]

Like the other thinkers mentioned, Tocqueville recognizes that people can be so concerned about not being outdone by others that they pursue status at the expense of their own interests—especially when the social, economic, and political system is in flux. Thus, in his view, envy and other status motivations are likely to be most consequential in unsettled times. This argument resonates with more recent findings in anthropology and psychology, which I discuss below.

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

While political theorists conceptualize status concerns as distinct from other interests, studies in behavioral economics go furthest in precisely identifying such divergences. For instance, these studies show that individuals sacrifice real income in order to achieve first place,[71] to stay out of last

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[70] Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, book 2, chapter 1, emphasis added.

[71] Bernardo A. Huberman, Christoph H. Loch, and Ayse Önçüler. "Status as a valued resource." In *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67.1 (2004), pp. 103–114. The authors conducted an experiment with an investment round followed by a lottery round. Investing more in the first round increased a subject's chances of moving on but decreased her chances of actually winning the lottery round. In a "status condition," the researchers promised a tag that read "winner" as well as applause

place,[72] or to lower the income of those better off than they regardless of their rank in the income hierarchy.[73] Zizzo and Oswald allowed subjects in their lab in Britain to "burn" the money of other subjects after it was allocated through a betting round. Eliminating ("burning") the money of other players was costly in this one-shot game; doing so meant that a subject walked out of the lab with a higher relative position but less money in his pocket (and no hope of turning that higher relative position into future material benefits). Contrary to Adam Smith's speculation that few people would allow envy to win out over self-interest, Zizzo found that over 60 percent of the subjects engaged in burning behavior.[74]

Research from all over the world finds similar evidence of real sacrifices to enhance one's relative position. In India, Fehr et al. found that in single-shot trust games with third-party

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to the player who invested the most money in the first round. They found that people invested much more money in the first round when they were promised status rewards (compared to a control condition) even though, by doing so, they lowered their expected earnings by about 18% on average. The study participants did not know each other's identity, so they could not expect these status rewards to translate into other material rewards outside the lab.

[72] Ilyana Kuziemko et al. "'Last-place aversion': Evidence and redistributive implications." In *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129.1 (2014), pp. 105–149, conducted an experiment in which participants were ranked according to monetary endowments. In each round, the person in last place had to choose between a guaranteed payment that almost never improved her relative position and a gamble that *might* allow her to leapfrog the person above her in the ranking. Earnings were the equivalent in expectation. A majority of the time, the person in last place chose the gamble. The researchers also used survey evidence to show that Americans who are wage laborers employed just above the minimum wage are the *most* likely to oppose increasing the minimum wage.

[73] Zizzo and Oswald. "Are people willing to pay to reduce others' incomes?"

[74] Daniel John Zizzo. "Inequality and procedural fairness in a money burning and stealing experiment." In *Research on Economic Inequality* 11 (2004), pp. 215–247, also finds that money burning is higher when wealth is arbitrarily acquired (randomly assigned) than when it is earned (through an experimental task), but that money burning occurs no matter the procedural allocation. Burning is thus not solely due to fairness concerns. Below I further discuss the empirical distinctions between envy and concerns for fairness, and their possible interaction.

punishment,[75] third parties frequently punished the other players at a cost to themselves, regardless of how the first and second parties had behaved toward each other.[76] The cost paid by the punisher was always slightly less than the cost he imposed, thus improving his relative position. Third-party players explained their willingness to punish in post-experiment surveys by saying, "I wanted to destroy [player] B," or "I was jealous of B; that is why it is important to impose a loss on him."[77] The authors described the phenomenon they observed as spite, which they defined as "the desire to reduce another's material payoff for the mere purpose of increasing one's relative payoff."[78] In rural Ethiopian villages, Kebede and Zizzo conducted money "burning" experiments and found a similar willingness to eliminate the earnings of advantaged players, even at a personal cost.[79]

Behavioral economists have also demonstrated empirically that status motivations can be distinguished from concerns for fairness. Kirchsteiger showed how envious motivations can be distinguished from fairness concerns in ultimatum games used in laboratory experiments.[80] In ultimatum games, one player decides how much of his endowment to share with another person. The second person then decides whether to accept or reject the first

[75] In a trust game, one player is given an amount of money and asked to choose some fraction of it (or all of it) to send to a second person. The amount of money the first person sends is doubled or tripled and then the second person has to decide how much of the new amount to send back to the first player. In Fehr et al.'s version, a third person watches the transaction and is allowed to punish the other players for how they choose to play the game.

[76] Fehr, Hoff, and Kshetramade. "Spite and development."

[77] Ibid., p. 496.

[78] Ibid., p. 494.

[79] Bereket Kebede and Daniel John Zizzo. "Social preferences and agricultural innovation: An experimental case study from Ethiopia." In *World Development 67* (2015), pp. 267–280.

[80] Georg Kirchsteiger. "The role of envy in ultimatum games." In *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 25.3 (1994), pp. 373–389. See also David K. Levine. "Modeling altruism and spitefulness in experiments." In *Review of Economic Dynamics* 1.3 (1998), pp. 593–622; and Keith Jensen. "Punishment and spite, the dark side of cooperation." In *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 365.1553 (2010), pp. 2635–2650.

person's offer. If she rejects the offer, neither player gets anything. The "homoeconomicus" expectation is that the second person should accept any offer. And yet many studies have found that people all over the world reject substantial offers that are less than equitable.[81] Kirchsteiger argues that while people might be tempted to conclude that these rejections are driven by fairness concerns, that conclusion "is misleading, because ...people are not concerned about *every* deviation from a fair share. They are only concerned if this deviation is disadvantageous for *themselves*."[82] He shows that the same people who reject unequal offers in an ultimatum game give far less than equal shares to someone worse off than they in a dictator game.[83] In other words, many people protest inequality that is disadvantageous to them but do not seek to rectify inequality that is disadvantageous to others. This is not to say that people are never concerned with fairness. Brañas et al. recently demonstrated that fairness concerns, envy, and spite can all be identified in patterns of play in the ultimatum game.[84] However, the distinguishing features of status motivations versus concerns for fairness relate to whether people apply distributive principles self-centeredly while maximizing their own relative position (status motivations), or whether they apply distributive principles widely and consistently (fairness). Status motivations and fairness concerns are both important explanatory factors that can be distinguished empirically.[85]

Thus, behavioral economists have gone furthest in showing empirically that status motivations have observable implications

[81] Joseph Patrick Henrich. *Foundations of human sociality: Economic experiments and ethnographic evidence from fifteen small-scale societies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[82] Kirchsteiger. "The role of envy in ultimatum games." p. 377, emphasis added.

[83] A dictator game involves the same set-up as an ultimatum game except that the second person has no choice but to accept the offer.

[84] Pablo Brañas-Garza et al. "Fair and unfair punishers coexist in the Ultimatum Game." In *Scientific Reports* 4 (2014).

[85] Anna Dreber and David G. Rand. "Retaliation and antisocial punishment are overlooked in many theoretical models as well as behavioral experiments." In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35.01 (2012), p. 24.

that are distinct from the pursuit of self-interest and from other
other-regarding preferences, such as a preference for equity or
fairness. Behavioral economists have also shown that commu-
nities can develop mechanisms to manage the envy and spite
of others. For instance, Boltz et al. show through a series of
laboratory experiments in Senegal that villagers who are wary of
the envy and spite of neighbors and extended kin take deliberate
steps to hide their income and assets.[86] They do so at a cost
to themselves, forgoing potential income in order to decrease
potential hostility from neighbors and friends. In these tightly
knit communities, people develop conventions and strategies
to anticipate and mitigate the status motivations of others, a
point to which I return when discussing anthropological studies
below.

One other insight from behavioral economics is that many
status motivations are felt more strongly when interpersonal dis-
parities are highly visible. Gershman argues that envy is likely
to be strongest where people's assets are not easily hidden.[87] It
is difficult to be envious of disparities one cannot observe. But
where differences in assets are highly visible, the disadvantaged
are constantly reminded of their low status. Gershman finds that,
at least among preindustrial societies, the more visible the assets,
the more likely there is to be frequent punishment of the most
advantaged members of the community. Working in rural villages
in Ethiopia, Kebede and Zizzo make a similar argument.[88] They
find that the rate of money burning in a village correlates with
investment in conspicuous forms of economic activities, such as
rain harvesting and fertilizer adoption. Envy and spite are both

[86] Marie Boltz, Karine Marazyan, and Paola Villar. "Preference for hidden
income and redistribution to kin and neighbors: A lab-in-the-field experiment in
Senegal." In Unpublished Paper, Paris School of Economics (2015). The authors use
the term "social pressure to redistribute" but refer to parts of the anthropological
literature on envy as motivation.

[87] Boris Gershman. "The economic origins of the evil eye belief." In *Journal of
Economic Behavior & Organization* 110 (2015), pp. 119–144.

[88] Kebede and Zizzo. "Social preferences and agricultural innovation: An
experimental case study from Ethiopia."

problematic when disparities are visible and frequently observed by those living in close proximity to one another.

PSYCHOLOGY

There is a rich body of psychological research on status motivations. Festinger, an early pioneer of "social comparison theory," wrote that it is difficult for us to assess our own abilities in isolation, so we tend to compare ourselves with others and use them as our benchmarks, even when doing so makes us feel worse about ourselves.[89] Indeed, most social comparisons are "spontaneous, effortless, and unintentional" and therefore "relatively automatic" rather than calculated.[90] To a large extent, we cannot avoid internally engaging in, and reacting to, social comparisons even when they do not make us feel good or improve our material situation.

For psychologists, envy is a pained response to an "upward" comparison (i.e., with those who are doing better than we are), whereas spite is a response to a "downward comparison" (i.e., with those who are worse off).[91] Following James's notion that emotions have response tendencies, psychologists have documented that both emotions are accompanied by a tendency to harm others.[92] Psychologists have documented evidence of envy and

[89] Festinger. "A theory of social comparison processes."

[90] Daniel T. Gilbert, R. Brian Giesler, and Kathryn A. Morris. "When comparisons arise." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69.2 (1995), pp. 227–236.

[91] David K. Marcus et al. "The psychology of spite and the measurement of spitefulness." In *Psychological Assessment* 26.2 (2014), pp. 563–574; Thomas A. Wills. "Downward comparison principles in social psychology." In *Psychological Bulletin* 90.2 (1981), pp. 245–271.

[92] William James. *Principles of psychology*. New York, NY: Dover, 1890. As Amy Cuddy et al. "Stereotype content model across cultures: Towards universal similarities and some differences." In *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48.1 (2009), pp. 1–33, and Fiske. *Envy up, scorn down: How status divides us*, make clear, the more benign feeling that may colloquially be referred to as envy can lead people to associate with the envied others. But the more malicious feeling of envy (the focus of this book) is likely to lead to harm when acted upon. Spite (or contempt, in Fiske's terminology) can lead either to active harm or to neglect of someone worse off.

spite in numerous societies, in both the developed and developing world,[93] although different terminology is sometimes used. For instance, Feather wrote several papers on a phenomenon in Australia he called "Tall Poppy Syndrome," wherein when one or more individuals rise above their friends and peers, those peers seek to "cut" them down, even if such behavior is costly.[94]

The psychological literature helps clarify the types of comparisons that are likely to give rise to status concerns. Reinforcing Aristotle's intuition, psychologists have often concluded that salient social comparisons, including envious ones, are made among "similar" others[95]—among neighbors, classmates, coworkers, family members and coethnics.[96] Individuals less often gauge their status against other individuals who are geographically remote,[97] or against people who are vastly and visibly different from them in background, experience, or abilities.[98]

Research in psychology tells us that we tend to envy, spite, and desire the admiration of "similar" others for two reasons: evaluation and visibility. We seek comparisons that help us determine the level of self-esteem we ought to carry. In-group members provide us with information that is relevant to our self-esteem. We believe these people to be somewhat similar to us either in capability or disposition. "People who are similar to us provide

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[93] Cuddy et al. "Stereotype content model across cultures: Towards universal similarities and some differences."

[94] Norman T. Feather. "Attitudes towards the high achiever: The fall of the tall poppy." In *Australian Journal of Psychology* 41.3 (1989), pp. 239–267.

[95] Festinger. "A theory of social comparison processes."

[96] See also Fiske. *Envy up, scorn down: How status divides us*; John Knight, Song Lina, and Ramani Gunatilaka. "Subjective well-being and its determinants in rural China." In *China Economic Review* 20.4 (2009), pp. 635–649; Wills, "Downward comparison principles in social psychology."

[97] Claudia Senik. "Direct evidence on income comparisons and their welfare effects." In *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 72.1 (2009), pp. 408–424; Knight, Lina, and Gunatilaka. "Subjective well-being and its determinants in rural China."; Geeta Gandhi Kingdon and John Knight. "Community, comparisons and subjective well-being in a divided society." In *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 64.1 (2007), pp. 69–90.

[98] Fiske. *Envy up, scorn down: How status divides us.*

us with a proxy self."[99] When they achieve more, have more, or are more, highly regarded, it indicates something bad about us.[100] The logic is that if *they* obtained that wealth or won that esteem, *we* could (and should) have won it, too.[101] Anderson et al. call this "the local ladder effect."[102]

There are certain types of groups with whose members we tend to assume we share similar capabilities, such as coworkers with similar responsibilities to ours,[103] and members of our same age cohort.[104] In addition, coethnicity can be used as a relatively low-cost and sometimes automatic heuristic for gauging similarity on a variety of dimensions.[105] In the presence of salient ethnic group boundaries, shared ethnicity may be used as a signal that two individuals share similar backgrounds. A person may also believe that his coethnics have similar capabilities, even though these judgments are often based on stereotypes.[106] Falling behind a coethnic is particularly likely to highlight failure in oneself, because, according to the same logic discussed above, given these

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[99] Ibid., p. 82.

[100] We "envy those whose possession of or success in a thing is a reproach to us: these are our neighbours and equals; for it is clear that it is our own fault we have missed the good thing in question; this annoys us, and excites envy in us" (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, book 10).

[101] Robert F. Bales et al. "Channels of communication in small groups." In *American Sociological Review* 16.4 (1951), pp. 461–468. The authors note that the attention to status within proximate groups of similar others may stem from early stages of evolution, when humans had to focus on surviving within face-to-face groups. They note that striving for this kind of within-group status occurs in non-human, small-group species as well.

[102] Anderson et al. "The local-ladder effect: Social status and subjective well-being."

[103] Frank. *Choosing the right pond: Human behavior and the quest for status*.

[104] Senik. "Direct evidence on income comparisons and their welfare effects."

[105] Mary J. Rotheram-Borus. "Adolescents' reference-group choices, self-esteem, and adjustment." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59.5 (1990), pp. 1075–1081.

[106] Brenda Major. "From social inequality to personal entitlement: The role of social comparisons, legitimacy appraisals, and group membership." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 26 (1994), pp. 293–293; Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major. "Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma." In *Psychological Review* 96.4 (1989), pp. 608–630.

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