Unpacking the Effects of Status on Creativity

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This research investigates how status influences individual creativity and the underlying process. We also examine how the impact of status is moderated by status mobility. The findings provide theoretical insights into the role of status on boosting or hampering individual creativity and have managerial implications for companies’ innovation strategy.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Understanding how to foster individual creativity is vital for boosting companies’ innovations and their chances of survival in today’s highly competitive and turbulent market. Prior research has documented a wide array of factors that impact individuals’ creative performance. Yet this stream of research has generally overlooked the influence of status on individuals’ creativity.

Status is considered as one of the fundamental dimensions of social hierarchy. Hence it stands to reason that this difference on status is likely to trickle down to influence how individuals make decisions and undertake various tasks. Given the importance and ubiquity of status in society in general and in business organizations in specific, examining how status affects individual creativity provides important insights and forseights to academics and practitioners.

The present research investigates the role of status in boosting or stifling individual creativity. We propose and find that, because middle-status experienced more status anxiety and are concerned about their status (de Button 2008; Mills 1951), thus they have low risk tolerance toward their performance than their high-and low-status counterparts, middle-class individuals’ creativity is the lowest one among all three tiers, suggesting a U-shaped relationship between status and creativity.

Meanwhile, given the boundary between status levels may become permeable and it is possible for individuals to move up their status in a social hierarchy or to be relegated from their current status (Harvey and Consalvi 1960). We posit that status mobility may moderate the relationship between status and creativity that is proposed above. Specifically, when status mobility is high, consistent with prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), we expect that high-status individuals will become more risk averse as the potential status loss may loom particularly large for them; low-status individuals will be more risk averse as well given conforming to established norms and other’s expectations will increase their likelihood to enhance their status (Pech 2001; Tourish and Vatcha 2005). On the contrary, due to the fact that creativity can increase one’s competence and visibility, thus increasing his chance to be promoted in the hierarchy (Lau, Li, & Chu 2004), thus, middle-status individuals will assume more risks and undertake their tasks in a more unconventional way, which leads to generating more creative solutions than their high- and low-status counterparts. In sum, we propose that although middle-class individuals exhibit least creativity when social mobility is low, they are more creative than high- or low-status individuals when social mobility is high—that is, an inverted U-shape occurs.

Two experiments investigate how individuals’ creativity varies as a function of their status and status mobility. Study 1 investigates whether status influences individuals’ creativity and sheds light on the psychological mechanism responsible for this effect -- individuals’ different risk seeking tendency; study 2 focuses on the moderating effect of status mobility. To briefly summarize:

Study 1 was a three-level (status: high, middle, and low) between-subjects design. Status manipulation scenario was adapted from Blader & Chen (2012) and asked participants to imagine they were an employee who works in a company with high-, middle-, or low-status as described. Participants were then asked to complete a shoe scuffing problem (Burroughs and Mick 2004; Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema 2012) as measurement of creativity. ANOVA of creativity index (Mehta et al. 2012) revealed a significant main effect of social status on creativity. Follow-up contrasts showed that participants were less creative in the middle-status condition than those in either the low-status or the high-status condition. No difference was detected between low- and high-status conditions.

Mediation analysis with coded risk-seeking tendency each participant exhibited in his/her creative solution showed that indirect effects excluded zero for mediation via risk-seeking tendency and creativity performance when high- vs. middle and low- vs. middle-status but not when high- vs. low-status. We also rule out mood and motivation as alternative explanations for our findings.

Study 2 was a 3 (status: low, middle, and high) × 2 (status mobility: low vs. high) between-subjects design. We primed status mobility with a story and asked participants to read and summarize the theme depicted in that story. Status scenario was a modified version of the status manipulation used in study 1. We also emphasized status mobility toward the end of this scenario. RAT was adopted as measurement of individual creativity (Chen, Peng, and Wu 2011). ANOVA of RAT performance revealed a significant interaction of status and status mobility. Follow-up contrast analyses show that when status mobility was low, there was a simple main effect of status on creativity. Specifically, participants in the middle-status condition were less creative than those in either the low-status or the high-status condition. These results replicate our findings in study 1; when status mobility was high, there was also a simple main effect of status on creativity. However, the pattern of results was reversed such that participants in the middle-status condition were actually more creative than those in either the low-status or the high-status condition.

Across two experiment studies, using different creative tasks, we provide converging evidence that individual creativity varies as a function of status and status mobility, driven by individual’s risk-seeking tendency. Our research contributes to the research stream on the effects of contextual characteristics on individual creativity by taking into account the important role of status and thus enriches our understanding of the antecedents of creativity. Further, our research contributes to the nascent but growing research on status. We reveal intriguing findings on the effects of status on creativity—on one hand, middle-status is least creative as compared to either end of a status order (a U-shape) when status mobility is low; on the other hand, our findings show that creativity is maximized at the middle-status than the low or high-status (an inverted-U shape) when status mobility is high. Thus, our research reconcile seemingly contradictory views on how status would influence creativity by investigating the dynamics of status mobility as an important moderator. These findings provide important implications for companies’ innovation strategy to harness individual creativity and build up companies’ competitive advantage.

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