“Creativity and the Fear of Status Loss”

TALK ABSTRACT

Classical research on social influence suggested that people are the most conforming in the middle of a status hierarchy as opposed to the top or bottom. Yet, this promising line of research was abandoned before the psychological mechanism behind middle status conformity had been identified. Moving beyond the early focus on conformity, we propose that the threat of status loss may make those with middle status more wary of advancing creative solutions in fear that they will be evaluated negatively. Using different manipulations of status and measures of creativity, we found that when being evaluated, middle status individuals were less creative than either high status or low status individuals (Studies 1 & 2). In addition, we found that anxiety at the prospect of status loss also caused individuals with middle status to narrow their focus of attention and to think more convergently (Study 3). We delineate the consequences of power and status both theoretically and empirically by showing that, unlike status, the relationship between power and creativity is positive and linear (Study 4). By both measuring status (Studies 2 & 3) and by manipulating it directly (Study 5), we demonstrate that the threat of status loss explains the consequences of middle status. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of our results for future research on status and problem solving on tasks that require either focus or flexibility.