To Give or Not to Give? Interactive Effects of Status and Legitimacy on Generosity

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Although previous research has demonstrated that generosity can lead to status gains, the converse effect of status on generosity has received less attention. This is a significant gap because groups and society at large rely on the beneficence of all members, especially those holding high-status positions. More broadly, research on the psychology of status remains largely unexplored, which is striking in light of the attention given to other forms of social hierarchy, such as power. The current work focuses on the psychology of status and explores the interactive effects of status and legitimacy on generosity. In particular, we hypothesize that status will decrease generosity when the status hierarchy is perceived as illegitimate because status can inflate views of one’s value to the group and sense of deservingness. In contrast, we hypothesize that status increases generosity when the status hierarchy is perceived as illegitimate, due to efforts to restore equity through one’s generosity. Our results support these hypotheses across 6 studies (a field study and 5 experiments) and empirically demonstrate that the effects of status and legitimacy on generosity can be attributed to concerns about equity in status allocation.

Keywords: status, hierarchy, legitimacy, equity, generosity

The linkages between generosity (and its opposite, selfishness) and status are of great importance in nearly all social relations. Generosity—whether it involves giving money, time, or other resources—is a critical feature of productive, viable, and satisfying interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. Moreover, the generosity of high-status individuals—that is, individuals who are respected and admired by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008)—can be especially impactful. This is because high-status individuals often serve as role models who guide others’ behavior due to their heightened prominence and influence (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Berger, Rosenholz, & Zelditch, 1980; Kunru & Vesterlund, 2010) and people’s desire to be associated with those having high status (Gould, 2002; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). As such, high-status individuals disproportionately influence the tone of their social relations and the norms, values, and cultures of their groups.

Yet despite the importance of the dynamics between generosity and status, the effect of status on generosity remains unclear. Scholars and laypeople alike seem to hold two contrasting images of high-status individuals. One image depicts high-status individuals as generous and prosocial, such as admired celebrities who commit their energies to good causes and highly respected colleagues who are generous with their time and assistance. This depiction is substantiated by scholarly research that finds a positive association between an individual’s generosity (and, more generally, contributions to one’s group) and the status he or she attains in groups (e.g., Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Willer, 2009; Flynn, 2003; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). The contrasting image of high-status individuals depicts them as prone to selfishness and egocentrism. This image is manifest in the chronic flow of revelations that detail greed and excess among individuals who had been regarded as high status, from newspaper headlines about respected celebrities engaging in lavishly selfish behaviors to office gossip about esteemed colleagues exposed as acting in self-serving ways. This image is likewise substantiated by scholarly research showing that people who are likely to feel high status often show a propensity to reap rewards associated with their privileged positions (De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005; de Kwaadsteniet & van Dijk, 2010; Graffin, Bundy, Porac, Wade, & Quinn, 2013; Guinote, Cotzía, Sandhu, & Siwa, 2015; Pettit & Sivana-than, 2012).

The prevalence of these conflicting images in casual conversation, the popular press, and academic research substantiates the validity of both images. Yet relatively little scholarly research has examined this duality, leaving us with an incomplete understanding of whether (or when) status increases or decreases generosity. Indeed, prior status research has primarily focused on demonstrating that generosity is a pathway to high status (e.g., Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009) and has paid less attention to the effect of one’s status on subsequent generosity (for a notable exception, see Willer, 2009). The relative inattention to the consequences of status on generosity is particularly striking given the amount of scholarly attention paid to the effects of other hierarchical bases—including power, dominance, and socioeconomic status (SES)—on generosity and related forms of pro-social behavior.
relationships. This insight distinguishes the psychology of status from that of other hierarchical bases such as power and SES, which are characterized by an inward orientation among those holding high rank. Finally, we complement prior power research that has explored legitimacy by identifying a distinct mechanism (namely, equity concerns) for the interactive effects of hierarchy legitimacy and one’s status.

Status and Generosity

Research finds that power and SES often reduce prosocial behaviors such as generosity (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Guinote et al., 2015; Handgraaf, Van Dijk, Vermunt, Wilke, & De Dreu, 2008; Lamers & Stapel, 2009; Piff et al., 2010; Rucker et al., 2011). However, scholars have long theorized that status is a distinct basis of hierarchical differentiation (Blader & Chen, 2014; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and recent empirical work finds that an individual’s status can either interact with or have directly opposite effects as other hierarchical bases in shaping his or her social judgments and behaviors (Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2016; Blader & Chen, 2012; Blader et al., 2016; Fast et al., 2012; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). The distinct effects of status can be understood by considering the processes that determine one’s status, and in particular the insight that status is entirely reliant on conferal from others (Berger et al., 1980; Gould, 2002; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Thus, status focuses individuals on how they are viewed by others and on their relations with others. That is, people vigilantly monitor their status (Anderson et al., 2015) and as such this prompts them to adopt an outward orientation (Blader et al., 2016). This contrasts with the well-documented inwardly orienting effect of power and SES, which at higher ranks focus people on their own goals and reduce attention to and concern about others (Côté, House, & Willer, 2015; Dubois et al., 2015; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whiston, & Liljenquist, 2008; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; Piff et al., 2010; Piff, Stancato, Martinez, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012; van Kleef et al., 2008). Notably, the outwardly orienting effect of status does not necessarily reflect a benevolent, empathic, or communal orientation toward others, but rather it primarily reflects attentiveness toward how one is perceived by others and one’s relationships with others. These insights highlight the importance of separately investigating the impact of status on generosity as well as the mechanisms that underlie that impact.

There is good reason to expect that status will enhance generosity. Group members who are generous are often rewarded with higher status (Flynn et al., 2006; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009). This reflects the social exchange processes by which status is conferred; high status is an incentive conferred to elicit contributions and commitment from the most valued group members (Berger et al., 1980). Thus, high status parties may be generous to propagate this exchange and maintain their privileged, highly valued positions (Petit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010). Furthermore, individuals who attain high status through their generosity may continue to be generous to maintain consistency with their own self-identity (Swann & Bosson, 2010). These arguments are corroborated by evidence that higher levels of status enhance generosity (Willer, 2009) and other related forms of prosociality, such as justice (Blader & Chen, 2012), perspective-taking (Blader et al.,...
the psychological experience of status may affect the linkages between status and generosity. In particular, high status may prompt an inflated view of one’s value to a group (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012; Barkow et al., 1975; Lerner, 1980; Pettit & Sivanathan, 2012). Notably, given the outwardly orienting nature of status, these inflated views among high status parties likely originate with—and are reinforced by—group members’ tendencies to be overly positive in their evaluations of relatively higher status group members (Berger et al., 1977; Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, & Norman, 1998; Darley & Gross, 1983; Humphrey, 1985; Kalkhoff, 2005; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Merton, 1968). Inflated views of one’s value to the group will enhance his or her sense of deservingness (i.e., one’s sense of the outcomes deserved based on the value of his or her inputs to the group; Feather, 1999) and, subsequently, may diminish the extent to which one feels compelled to be generous. Research on leadership, which is distinct but nevertheless carries overtones of status, is consistent with these predictions. For instance, high-status CEOs—who have a greater sense of hubris (Hayward & Hambrick, 1997) and thus are likely to have an exaggerated sense of their value to their organizations—extract more compensation and yet devote less time and effort to advancing organizational goals compared to lower-status CEO (Malmendier & Tate, 2009).

In sum, prior theorizing and research suggest conflicting predictions about the effects of one’s status on his or her generosity. We propose that the perceived legitimacy and equity of one’s status position may resolve this apparent paradox.

Moderating Effects of Legitimacy

As noted earlier, status hierarchy legitimacy is the perception that the status hierarchy is “appropriate, proper, and just” (Tyler, 2006, p. 376). Legitimacy is a fundamental attribute of, and a critical determinant of reactions to, all types of social systems and actors (Tost, 2011; Tyler, 2006). Indeed, people show greater acceptance, support, and identification with legitimate (vs. illegitimate) entities (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler & Blader, 2005; Walker, Thomas, & Zelditch, 1986; Walker & Zelditch, 1993). Status hierarchy legitimacy, which defines the extent to which status is seen as equitably allocated (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003), is a particularly important concern for individuals (Hays, 2013), and may be relevant in shaping people’s reactions to their status, including their generosity.

An extensive body of research demonstrates that equity is a fundamental concern that guides people’s reactions to their social encounters, highlighting that people seek proportionality between their contributions and benefits in those encounters (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961; Walster et al., 1978). People prefer equity over inequity, regardless of whether inequity is in the form of under- or overadvantage. Because equity is such a prominent concern, inequitable situations prompt steps to create equity even if one is overadvantaged and thus such steps are costly (Austin & Walster, 1975; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Gino & Pierce, 2009, 2010; Greenberg, 1988; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012; Pritchard, Dunnette, & Gorgenson, 1972). The drive to address inequitable overadvantage is so fundamental that it emerges in very early stages of human development (Blake & McAlliffe, 2011) and has even been shown among primates (Brosnan & de Waal, 2014).

The outwardly orienting effect of status is likely to make equity concerns especially prominent because status conferral is a particularly critical social exchange. The stakes for those conferring status are high because they rely on it as a means of ensuring and enhancing the viability of the group (Gould, 2002; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). The stakes for status recipients are similarly high because status begets many benefits and fulfills a fundamental human need (Anderson et al., 2015; Barkow et al., 1975). The importance of the status-conferral social exchange to both parties will prompt enhanced sensitivity to the integrity and quality of these exchanges, which are assessed by the equity of the exchange. Moreover, equity concerns receive greater attention in exchanges that are characterized by differentiated and unequal ranking, unspecified obligations, interdependence, and trust (i.e., in social, rather than contractual, exchanges; Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986; Deutsch, 1985; Fiske, 1992; Homans, 1961; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Hsu, 1997), precisely the characteristics that describe status dynamics. This may explain why people prefer the status ranking that they feel is equitable, even if this equates to them having relatively lower status (Anderson, Willer, Kilduff, & Brown, 2012).

When a status hierarchy is perceived as legitimate, status is seen as allocated through fair processes, and individuals’ status positions are likewise regarded as fair and deserved (Jost et al., 2003; Tyler, 2006). This will prompt the sense that status is equitably allocated—that is, that people are deserving of their status positions based on their relative value to the group—which will satisfy concerns about the equity of one’s status and, in turn, facilitate a context in which other factors can determine the effect of status on generosity. One such factor may be the inflated views of one’s value to the group that, as noted previously, often accompany increasing levels of status. Inflated views about one’s value to the group will lead one to feel that he or she is contributing more than others are, and thus deserves more in return. This may subsequently decrease generosity—withstanding resources ensures that one receives the outcomes that he or she feels are deserved. Thus, higher status may increase one’s sense of deservingness (Blader & Chen, 2011; Diekmann, Sondak, & Barsness, 2007) and, in turn, diminish baseline levels of generosity—baselines that may be quite considerable given that groups characterized by legitimacy generally elicit high levels of endorsement and commitment (Tyler, 2006). In this way, inflated judgments of one’s value to the group may alter one’s view of the necessity and importance of generosity (Kafashan, Sparks, Griskevicius, & Barclay, 2014). Thus, when individuals feel that the status hierarchy is legitimate and their relative status is equitable and deserved, we predict that increasing levels of status will decrease generosity.

Illegitimacy, in contrast, will prompt a sense that status allocation processes and outcomes are unfair and that status is inequitably allocated. In this situation, individuals are likely to experience inequity along a continuum from underadvantaged to
overadvantaged in terms of their relative status. These feelings will receive great attention and concern, and remedying this sense of inequity will be a priority (Adams, 1965). People who sense that they are receiving more or less status than they deserve will be motivated to take steps to restore their sense of equity, for example by calibrating their behavior to the status they are receiving.

More specifically, illegitimate status hierarchies may prompt a sense among low-status individuals that they are inequitably underadvantaged, that is, that their value to the group exceeds the privileges (or lack thereof) associated with their relatively low status. They may therefore strive to restore equity by withholding generosity. As status increases, however, the form of perceived inequity will shift from underadvantage to overadvantage, accompanied by an increasing sense that the privileges of one’s relatively high status exceed one’s value to the group (Anderson, Willer, et al., 2012). This may prompt efforts to restore equity by increasing generosity, despite its costs, because generosity can address overadvantage and thus make one’s higher status feel equitable (Tyler, 2006). Our prediction that individuals will increase generosity to address concerns about status inequities (specifically status overadvantage) is supported by integrating the dual insights that generosity is a key basis for status conferred and that efforts to restore equity typically focus on resources that are seen as appropriate to the exchange (Foà & Foà, 1976). Thus, we predict that when the status hierarchy is perceived as illegitimate, status will positively affect generosity. Interestingly, high-status individuals may also be drawn to generosity as a means of restoring equity due to normative expectations that high-status individuals should be generous (Flynn et al., 2006; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Willer, 2009). Conversely, low-status group members, especially those who feel their status is illegitimate, may be less invested and engaged in the group and its status dynamics (Blader et al., 2016) and therefore less likely to take action to remedy the inequity. Overall, we predict that status position will interact with status hierarchy legitimacy such that status decreases generosity in legitimate hierarchies but increases generosity in illegitimate hierarchies. In other words, we predict that legitimacy may address the paradoxical effects of status on generosity because it defines whether people sense that their status position is equitable or whether they must take steps to restore equity through the extent of their generosity.

### Comparing Status to Other Bases of Hierarchy

Prior to presenting our studies in which we test these predictions, we would like to highlight a critical distinction between our theorizing and prior research on other bases of hierarchy, notably power and SES. Specifically, our theorizing emphasizes the insight that status orient people outwardly because it is conferred via a social exchange process, whereas power and SES orient people inwardly and diminish their concerns about others (Dubois et al., 2015; Galinsky et al., 2008; Galinsky et al., 2006; van Kleef et al., 2008). Thus, the psychological dynamics associated with status are different from those associated with power or SES. We argue that one consequence of the outwardly orienting effect of status is a heightened concern for equity in one’s relationships and, more generally, for deservingness and fairness (Blader & Chen, 2011, 2012), because these are important bases on which social encounters and social relations are evaluated. In contrast, the egocentric, inward orientation prompted by power and SES is likely to diminish equity and deservingness concerns (Blader & Chen, 2012), and instead heighten perceived entitlement (De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Overbeck, 2009).

Importantly, deservingness and entitlement are quite distinct; deservingness is based on one’s contributions and actions, whereas entitlements are seen as rights that follow from who one is and from the position that one holds (Feather, 1999, 2003). Deservingness reflects relatively greater other- and group-orientation because it involves a focus on what one has contributed and thus the benefits one has earned. Such deservingness judgments are often made in relation to other group members. In contrast, entitlement is relatively more egocentric because it focuses on who one is and his or her inherent rights. Thus, although legitimate status and power may have similar, negative effects on generosity (Côté et al., 2015; Pfiff et al., 2010; Rucker et al., 2011), the outward orientation of status suggests that the effect of status is due to a sense of deservingness, whereas the effect of power is due to one’s inherent sense of rights and entitlements.

Notably, illegitimacy has also been found to moderate the effects of power and SES. However, legitimacy is theorized to moderate the effect of power and SES because it impacts the stability, rather than the equity, of one’s position. Illegitimate hierarchies receive less endorsement and acceptance, and thus one’s hierarchical position is more susceptible to change (Tyler, 2006; Walker et al., 1986). For high-power or high-SES individuals, instability (arising from illegitimacy) threatens egocentric goals to maintain one’s privileged position, often prompting self-serving reactions that seek to limit those threats (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Case & Maner, 2014; Georgeson & Harris, 2006; Kraus & Callaghan, 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010; Williams, 2014). These reactions are the opposite of the equity restoration concerns and generosity that we predict follow from illegitimate status. Moreover, even when illegitimate high power or high SES lead to somewhat more generous reactions, these reactions nevertheless reflect an effort to stabilize one’s advantageous position and to pursue egocentric goals (Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013; Hays & Goldstein, 2015). In contrast, we do not expect that stability plays a central role in explaining the effect of illegitimate status on generosity. This is because mutability is an inherent characteristic of status hierarchies (Hays & Bendersky, 2015), irrespective of their legitimacy, due to the conferred nature of status (note that we empirically verify this reasoning by examining the role of stability in Study 6).

Finally, it is worth clarifying the distinction between the current research and the psychology of prestige and dominance, another hierarchical framework that has received significant research attention. Prestige involves voluntarily conferred deference, whereas dominance involves use or threat of force (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Although sometimes referred to as alternate bases of status, prestige and dominance are more appropriately viewed as routes to influence (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013), just as status and power are also both routes to influence (Blader & Chen, 2014). In general, prestige is nearly synonymous with status while dominance is much more closely related to power. Although we focus on status in the present work, we speculate that our theorizing and empirical evidence would likely apply to hierarchies based on prestige as well. Yet we caution that such speculation is tentative because prior research has primarily examined...
the conferral and interpersonal consequences of prestige, with far less attention to the psychological dynamics of prestige-holders themselves.

**Research Overview**

We present six studies that test our predictions about the interactive effect of status and legitimacy on generosity, and the role of equity considerations in explaining that interactive effect. Study 1 is a study of Master of Business Administration (MBA) students, in which status, legitimacy, and generosity were measured. Studies 2 and 3 extend the findings of Study 1 by taking an experimental approach, manipulating status and legitimacy to more rigorously test our causal predictions in a controlled setting. Studies 4 and 5 examine the role of equity concerns, our predicted mechanism, in explaining the effect of status and legitimacy on generosity. In these studies, we manipulate our proposed mechanism (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Specifically, we provide some participants with an opportunity to address their equity concerns prior to deciding how generously to behave. Finally, in Study 6, we test an alternative explanation for our predictions. Namely, we examine whether hierarchy stability (rather than equity concerns) explains the effects of status and legitimacy on generosity. Moreover, in Study 6 we further validate our theorizing by predicting and testing whether dispositional status concern moderates our predicted effects.

**Study 1**

We conducted a round-robin survey of groups of MBA students who worked together for a period of 6 months on a consulting field project with clients external to the university. This setting was highly conducive to testing our predictions because the groups worked together over an extended period of time on tasks of real significance: The projects were a degree requirement, performance demands were high, and impression management concerns were prominent because of the external audience of the groups’ output. Moreover, deliverables and group structures were quite similar and thus enable direct comparisons between groups.

**Method**

**Participants.** Two hundred fifty-five part-time MBA students at a west coast university, organized into 51 teams with an average of 5.04 members (SD = .20 members), received an invitation to participate in this survey. Of those who received the invitation, 179 students (131 males) agreed to participate in the study, a 70% response rate. These participants had an average age of 32.53 years (SD = 3.63 years) and represented 47 teams with 3.81 participants per team (SD = .95).

**Procedure.** Participants responded to two surveys. The first survey was administered in the first week of the project, just after the groups assembled for the first time (T1). The second survey was administered about three months into the group project, the midpoint (T2).

**Measures.** To capture a baseline measure of generosity, at T1 participants responded to two items (r = .43) about the extent to which they were helpful and sought to meet others’ needs, which are task-relevant forms of generosity in the context of their groups. Items included “I will be willing to help when needed” and “I will be flexible and try to accommodate others’ needs,” and responses were on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). At T2, participants responded to the same two items (r = .49) on the same seven-point scale. Also at T2, status was assessed by asking participants to answer three questions (α = .87) about each group member, including themselves, on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much): “How much (respect/esteem/prominence) (does [team member name]/do you) have in the group?” We calculated each participant’s target status score, which indicates how a group member is perceived by others relative to the group’s mean (Kenny & La Voie, 1984; Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004) and used these scores to indicate each participant’s status ranking within the group, our measure of status in this study (ICC[1] = .34, ICC[2] = .68, F[255, 816] = 3.13, p < .001).

To assess individual perceptions of status hierarchy legitimacy, we calculated the discrepancy between participants’ relative status and self-perceived relative value to their groups. To assess the latter, participants rated themselves (as well as all group members) in the T2 survey on three qualities relevant to the group’s successful performance—knowledgeable, capable, and competent (α = .85). Specifically, participants responded to the prompt, “Please rate ([yourself/team member name]) on the following dimensions in the context of your team,” followed by the three qualities listed earlier, on a seven-point scale where anchors corresponded to each quality (e.g., “knowledgable” was anchored by “unknowledgable” and “knowledgable”; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). We used these scores to determine each participant’s self-ranking of his or her value to the group relative to others. We then calculated the perceived legitimacy of the status hierarchy as the absolute value of the difference between each participant’s status and value rankings, resulting in higher scores representing larger discrepancies between status and value to the group (we multiplied these scores by −1, so the measure indicates relative legitimacy). Such discrepancies thus represent divergence from legitimacy and are thus an index of perceived (in)equity. We examine the absolute value of the difference, rather than the raw difference score, given our premise that status and legitimacy are orthogonal and that they interact to shape legitimacy. The raw difference score conflates status and legitimacy and, moreover, reflects low legitimacy at low (i.e., negative) and high (i.e., positive) numbers but reflects high legitimacy at the midpoint (i.e., zero). As such, it is empirically problematic to test our predictions by calculating the interaction between the raw difference score and status or by examining the direct effect of the raw difference score on generosity. In contrast, the absolute value of the difference score maintains the orthogonality of status and legitimacy, enabling us to examine their interaction and to test our predictions by examining the simple slopes of status at low and high legitimacy. For instance, at low levels of legitimacy, the simple slope of status captures our prediction that generosity increases as one moves from underadvantage (at low status) to overadvantage (at high status).

1 Consistent with this logic, we confirmed that our measure of legitimacy is orthogonal to status (r = .04, p = .536), whereas the raw difference score is positively correlated with status (r = .48, p < .001).
Results

We analyze our data using mixed-effects regression to account for the nonindependence of participants nested in groups. We regressed T2 generosity on status, legitimacy, and their interaction, controlling for T1 generosity to examine change in generosity over time (Cronbach & Furby, 1970). Following previous research that employs similar difference scores (e.g., O’Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989), we control for participants’ value rank to ensure that any effects of legitimacy, which was operationalized as the difference between status and value, are above and beyond the effects of the status and value rankings themselves (participant status is included, and thus accounted for, in the analysis). See Table 1 for detailed results. We found significant effects for both of our control variables (T1 generosity, \( \gamma = .27, p < .001 \); competence, \( \gamma = .10, p = .001 \)), a negative effect of status (\( \gamma = -.19, p = .014 \)), and a marginal negative effect of legitimacy (\( \gamma = -.13, p = .055 \)). Importantly, the expected interaction of status and legitimacy was significant (\( \gamma = -.25, p = .001 \)). To examine the pattern of the interaction, we graphed the relationship between status and generosity at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of perceived legitimacy (see Figure 1; Aiken & West, 1991). As predicted, there is a significant positive relationship between status and generosity at low legitimacy (\( \gamma = .14, p = .005 \)) and a significant negative relationship at high legitimacy (\( \gamma = -.14, p = .027 \)).

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 are consistent with our predictions and theorizing. In particular, this study provides initial support for our hypothesis that status is negatively related to generosity when one’s status is perceived as relatively legitimate, but positively related to generosity when status is perceived as relatively illegitimate. Moreover, we observe these effects in real task groups that interacted over an extended period of time on a project of significance.

There are a number of limitations of this study, however. First, because our data are cross-sectional (except for T1 generosity), we cannot definitively determine the direction of causality. Rather than one’s status and perceptions of legitimacy affecting generosity toward the group and its members, perhaps generosity influ-

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mixed-Effects Regression of Generosity on Status and Legitimacy (Study 1)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<td>Peer-rated status (T2)</td>
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Note. T2 = Time 2; T1 = Time 1.
* \( p < .10 \)  † \( p < .05 \)  ‡ \( p < .01 \)  *** \( p < .001 \).

2 Because status, legitimacy, and generosity were assessed at T2, we cannot infer causality despite our focus on change in generosity (i.e., given that we control for T1 generosity). The pattern of results is unchanged if we adopt a fully cross-sectional approach and omit the T1 generosity control. We conducted post hoc analyses to test for main and interactive effects of gender on generosity in all of our studies. Among all of these analyses, the only significant finding was a significant main effect of gender in Study 3, which we describe in the results of that study.

Figure 1. Change in generosity as a function of status and legitimacy (Study 1).

Discussion

In Study 2, participants expected to work in dyads on a brainstorming task. Participants learned that they would have a high or low-status role that was either legitimate or illegitimate, and had a subsequent opportunity to demonstrate generosity toward their partner by allocating a series of points that could ostensibly be exchanged for additional monetary compensation.

Method

Participants. Eighty-two students (24 males) at a large university participated in the study.

Design and procedure. Participants were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (status: high vs. low) \( \times \) 2 (legitimacy: legitimate vs. illegitimate) design. Because the study ostensibly involved an online interaction with another person, participants entered their initials and gender and, following a brief delay, saw the initials of their (fictitious) partner. Next, participants learned that they would complete a business-related task where they would have one of two roles, Idea Producer or Worker, adopting a...
paradigm used in prior status research (Fast et al., 2012; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). Instructions stated that prior participants tended to respect and admire the Idea Producer but had little respect or admiration for the Worker. Participants also learned that role assignments would be based on relative scores on a business aptitude assessment. Following these instructions, participants answered a series of business-related, multiple-choice questions.

After completing the assessment, participants in the legitimate high-status condition learned that they had scored higher than their partner and would therefore have the Idea Producer role. Participants in the legitimate low-status condition supposedly scored lower than their partner and would have the role of Worker. Participants in the illegitimate conditions saw an alert that the experimenters needed an even number of males and females in the Idea Producer role and would therefore (unexpectedly) assign roles by gender rather than assessment score (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Participants in the illegitimate high-status condition learned that they had scored lower than their partner but would have the Idea Producer role based on their gender. Participants in the illegitimate low-status condition had purportedly scored higher than their partner but would have the Worker role based on gender.

After learning the assessment scores and role assignments, participants completed a decision-making task ostensibly being piloted for an unrelated study. This task was a dictator game where the participant would either be randomly assigned to be the allocator or receiver and the partner would have the opposite role. In reality, all participants were assigned to the allocator role. Participants were asked to allocate 1,000 points between themselves and their partner. Instructions stated that the points could be exchanged at the end of the study for additional compensation. The number of points allocated to their partner is our measure of generosity.

To examine the success of our legitimacy manipulation, which was a novel adaptation to this experimental paradigm, we next asked participants to indicate their agreement with this statement: “Roles in our group were assigned in a fair manner,” on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We also had them answer response to the statement, “Who has higher status in the group?” on a scale ranging from 1 (participant’s initials) to 7 (fictitious partner’s initials) to further verify the status manipulation, which we were replicating from prior research using this paradigm. Participants were then asked to report any suspicions they had about the study and were debriefed and dismissed; they did not complete the decision-making task.

Results

A 2 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the legitimacy manipulation check item indicated a significant effect of legitimacy, $F(1, 78) = 26.02, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$, but no effect of status, $F(1, 78) = 2.43, p = .123$, and no interaction, $F(1, 78) = .00, p = .997$. As expected, participants in the legitimate condition felt that role assignments were more legitimate ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.39$) than did participants in the illegitimate condition ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.54$). A 2 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) ANOVA on the status manipulation check item indicated a significant effect of status, $F(1, 78) = 62.60, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .44$, but no effect of legitimacy, $F(1, 78) = 1.68, p = .198$ and no interaction, $F(1, 78) = 1.90, p = .173$. As found in prior work, participants in the high-status condition felt higher status ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.81$) than did participants in the low-status condition ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.14$).

Discussion

Consistent with Study 1 and our predictions, we found that participants with legitimate high status were less generous than were participants with legitimate low status, whereas illegitimate high status had the opposite effect, increasing generosity compared with illegitimate low status. Moreover, this study extends Study 1 by manipulating status and legitimacy, thereby allowing more definitive causal inferences. Although both studies support our theorizing about the interactive effects of status and legitimacy on generosity, these studies only enable us to compare differences in generosity between relatively lower versus higher status individuals (at different levels of legitimacy). Although our theorizing primarily focuses on these relative differences, it would nevertheless be valuable to investigate the effects of low and high status as compared to a neutral baseline, that is, a control condition. That is, compared with a control condition, does legitimate high status decrease generosity, legitimate low status increase generosity, or both? We conducted Study 3 to answer this question.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed to provide an additional test of our predictions and to compare the effects of low and high status against a baseline control condition. Importantly, there are several appropriate, yet distinct, ways to operationalize the baseline control conditions that enable closer examination of our effects. Therefore, in the interest of being comprehensive, we adopted three different approaches to operationalizing these control conditions.

Because our suspicion check appeared at the end of our study (and all subsequent studies), it is unclear whether participants held any of the suspicions they expressed while responding to our generosity measure. Indeed, many of those reporting suspicion noted that their concerns only began to emerge late in the study as they began to wonder why the group activity had not yet commenced. To avoid potentially biasing our sample by excluding valid respondents (and to avoid unnecessary reduction in statistical power), we report results based on our full sample of participants in all studies. In addition, however, we also report the number of suspicious participants as well as the effect of excluding these participants on our findings in each study. In Study 2, six participants expressed some level of suspicion about presence of others but no participants expressed suspicion about the legitimacy manipulation. The interaction remains significant ($p < .001$) after excluding these participants, as do all reported contrasts ($p < .05$).
Our first approach operationalized our baseline control as an equal-status condition, fully crossed with legitimacy (i.e., examining equal status within both legitimacy and illegitimacy). This approach compares relatively low and high status against a baseline that involves no relative status differences among group members, while still maintaining the salience of the status construct. This approach has the advantage of neatly isolating the effect of relatively low versus high status while holding status salience constant across all conditions. However, this approach poses potential issues since egalitarian status hierarchies are relatively uncommon and, when present, may be perceived as having a number of unique, confounding characteristics. Our second approach operationalized our baseline control as a no-status condition, again fully crossed with legitimacy. This approach avoids the potential issues posed by an equal-status control condition, and moreover is perhaps the modal approach to operationalizing a baseline control condition in the social hierarchy literature. However, a no-status baseline control has the disadvantage of conflating status level and status salience. Finally, our third approach sought to establish a baseline control condition that would provide an index of generosity when neither status nor legitimacy is invoked, and thus was operationalized as a condition in which there was no mention of either status or legitimacy.

Method
Participants. Three hundred thirty-nine students (181 males) recruited from two large universities participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Participants were assigned to one of nine conditions in a 4 (status: high, low, equal, no status) × 2 (legitimacy: legitimate vs. illegitimate) + 1 (no status, no legitimacy) between-subjects design.

Design and procedure. The study design was similar to Study 2, though there were a few differences to note. First, after entering their initials and gender, participants saw the initials of two (fictitious) team members with whom they would work. We changed the ostensible group size from two (as in Study 2) to three to enable us to test our predictions in a group, rather than dyadic, context and to thus more closely replicate the findings of Study 1 (which involved groups). Our examination of groups is also worthwhile because observers play a significant role in status dynamics (Ridgeway & Diekema, 1989). Second, to ensure that the assumed gender composition of the group did not vary by legitimacy condition, we provided information regarding the gender of all supposed team members. In all conditions, the participant was ostensibly working with one person of the same gender and one person of opposite gender.

Third, whereas the role labels and descriptions in our low and high-status conditions were consistent with Study 2, we adapted them for our new equal-status and no-status control conditions. Specifically, in the equal and no-status conditions, the instructions indicated that participants would be assigned to one of three Idea Worker roles (labeled X, Y, and Z). To ensure that these roles were seen as distinct from one another yet essentially comparable, participants were informed that each role involved a unique set of responsibilities but that all roles were equivalent in the overall balance of types of tasks involved. Participants in our equal-status conditions were informed that prior participants had reported viewing all three roles as equal in status, whereas there was no mention of status to participants in our no-status conditions.

As in Study 2, in all legitimacy and illegitimacy conditions, roles would ostensibly be assigned on the basis of team members' scores on a business aptitude assessment. In the high- and low-status conditions, the member of each group with the highest overall score would be assigned to the Idea Producer role. In the equal and no status conditions, team members would be assigned to the three distinct Idea Worker roles based on their ostensibly performance on specific components of the business aptitude assessment (labeled divergent thinking, convergent thinking, and integrative thinking); these components purportedly assessed the abilities most suited to the responsibilities emphasized in each of the distinct Idea Worker roles. In the no status, no legitimacy condition, participants were informed that team members would be randomly assigned to the distinct Idea Worker roles, and the business aptitude assessment was purportedly being piloted for unrelated research. Participants then completed a series of business-related, multiple-choice questions.

After completing the business assessment, participants in the legitimate conditions learned their scores and role assignments as expected, and role assignments were congruent with relative scores. In the legitimate high- (low-) status condition, participants were informed that they had achieved a higher (lower) overall score than the other team members, scoring highest (lowest) on two of the components and tying with another team member for top (lowest) score on a third component (this was done to enhance the believability of the test scores) and were thus assigned to the Idea Producer (Worker) role. In the legitimate equal- and no status conditions, each team member scored highest on one of the three components and was assigned to the Idea Worker role ostensibly linked to that component. As in Study 2, participants in the illegitimate high- and low-status conditions received an unexpected warning that the study required an even balance of genders in the Idea Producer role and therefore role assignments would be based on gender rather than on business aptitude score. Participants in the illegitimate high- (low-) status condition then received information that they had scored the lowest (highest) but were assigned to the Idea Producer (Worker) role. In the illegitimate equal and no status conditions, participants received a similar message, except it stated that the study required an even balance of genders in each of the Idea Worker roles and therefore role assignments would be based on gender rather than the component scores of the business aptitude assessment. In the no status, no legitimacy condition, roles were randomly assigned as expected.
After learning their business assessment scores and role assignments, participants completed a resource allocation task similar to the one used in Study 2. In this case, all group members would allocate 100 points among themselves and the two other members of the group. The points could be exchanged for lottery tickets at the end of the study. Our measure of generosity is the sum of the points allocated to the two other group members. Participants were then asked to report any suspicions they had and were debriefed and dismissed; they did not complete the decision-making task.

Results

Given our study design, we analyzed our data using two separate ANOVA tests: A 4 (status: high, low, equal, none) × 2 (legitimacy: legitimate vs. illegitimate) and a one-way ANOVA composed of five conditions (the four treatment conditions—legitimate high-status, legitimate low-status, illegitimate high-status, illegitimate low-status—and the no status, no legitimacy control condition).

A 4 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) ANOVA on the generosity measure indicated a marginal main effect of status, $F(3, 292) = 2.56, p = .056$, $\eta^2 = .03$, no main effect of legitimacy, $F(1, 292) = .20, p = .659$, $\eta^2 = .00$, and an interaction of status and legitimacy, $F(3, 292) = 6.49, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$ (see Figure 3). We further analyzed the pattern of our interaction, first by comparing the treatment conditions to the equal-status control conditions (within each level of legitimacy) and second by comparing the treatment conditions to the no-status control conditions (within each level of legitimacy).

Comparing treatment conditions to the equal-status control conditions revealed that participants in the legitimate high-status condition were significantly less generous ($M = 54.14, SD = 16.99$) than were participants in either the legitimate low-status condition ($M = 66.86, SD = 10.55$), $F(1, 292) = 10.30, p = .002$, or the legitimate equal-status control condition ($M = 62.97, SD = 7.30$), $F(1, 292) = 5.03, p = .026$. Participants in the legitimate low-status and equal-status control conditions did not differ, $F(1, 292) = .98, p = .324$. Conversely, participants in the illegitimate high-status condition were significantly more generous ($M = 66.85, SD = 10.92$) than were participants in the illegitimate low-status condition ($M = 57.10, SD = 20.27$), $F(1, 292) = 6.14, p = .014$, and the illegitimate equal-status control condition ($M = 58.33, SD = 20.86$), $F(1, 292) = 4.64, p = .032$. Participants in the illegitimate low-status and equal-status control conditions did not differ, $F(1, 292) = .11, p = .743$. This pattern supports our prediction that legitimate high-status decreases generosity, compared with either low-status or an equal-status control condition. Moreover, it is also consistent with our prediction that illegitimate high-status increases generosity, compared with either a low-status or an equal-status control condition.

We next conducted a similar set of analyses that compared the treatment conditions to the no status control conditions. These analyses revealed that participants in the legitimate low-status condition were significantly more generous than were participants in legitimate no status control condition ($M = 52.47, SD = 22.18$), $F(1, 292) = 13.53, p < .001$. However, participants in the legitimate high-status and no status control conditions did not differ in generosity, $F(1, 292) = .18, p = .671$. In contrast, participants in the illegitimate high-status condition were significantly more generous than were participants in the illegitimate no status control condition ($M = 57.62, SD = 17.22$), $F(1, 292) = 5.39, p = .021$, whereas participants in the illegitimate low-status and no-status control conditions did not differ, $F(1, 292) = .02, p = .891$.

We next examined the effect of our treatment conditions in relation to our no status, no legitimacy baseline control condition. A one-way ANOVA of the generosity measure including the four treatment conditions and the no status, no legitimacy control condition indicated a main effect of condition, $F(4, 180) = 5.63, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Planned contrasts indicated that participants in the legitimate low-status condition were more generous than were participants in this control condition ($M = 53.97, SD = 20.05$), $F(1, 180) = 11.30, p < .001$. However, participants in the legitimate high-status and control conditions did not differ in generosity, $F(1, 180) = .00, p = .966$. In contrast, participants in the illegitimate high-status condition were more generous than were participants in the control condition, $F(1, 180) = 10.77, p = .001$, and participants in the illegitimate low-status and control conditions did not differ in generosity, $F(1, 180) = .71, p = .401$.

Discussion

In this study, we replicated the results of Studies 1 and 2, and found additional support for our hypotheses that legitimate status decreases generosity, whereas illegitimate status increases generosity. Moreover, we extended the results of our prior studies by comparing our treatment conditions against three types of baseline control conditions to isolate the extent to which our effects are driven by low- versus high-status individuals. Compared against an equal status baseline, legitimate high status decreased generosity and illegitimate high status increased generosity, whereas both legitimate and illegitimate low status reflected similar levels of generosity as their respective equal-status conditions. These find-

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4 In post hoc analyses of gender effects, we only found a main effect of gender ($p = .04$), with women tending to be more generous than men were, regardless of status or legitimacy. There were no gender interactions ($p > .21$).

5 Four participants expressed suspicion about the legitimacy manipulation and 26 participants expressed some level of suspicion about the presence of others. The Status × Legitimacy interaction remains significant if we exclude these participants ($p < .001$), as is the effect of condition in the one-way ANOVA ($p < .001$) and all reported contrasts remain significant ($p < .05$) except for two contrasts that become marginally significant: illegitimate high status versus illegitimate equal status ($p = .078$) and illegitimate high status versus illegitimate no status ($p = .073$).
ings suggest that our predicted effects are primarily driven by high status individuals. Moreover, when the status hierarchy was illegitimate, we found a similar pattern in relation to our no status controls (both our illegitimate no status and no status/no legitimacy controls), again finding that our predicted effects are driven by the increased generosity of high-status individuals. However, when the status hierarchy was legitimate, comparisons to our no status baseline controls indicate that legitimate low status increased generosity and that legitimate high status did not differ from the control condition.

Thus, although our findings confirm that legitimate status decreases generosity, conclusions about the nature of that effect differ depending on how the baseline control is conceptualized. One possible explanation for these differences is that equal status increases the salience of status (as compared with no status), which is likely to enhance individuals’ focus on social relations and group membership. This focus may, in turn, elicit the group-serving commitment and engagement that characterize people’s reactions to legitimate systems. When no mention of status is made, status (and thus social relations and group membership) is less salient, likely prompting somewhat greater self-focus (rather than group-focus). As a result, baseline generosity will be higher under legitimate equal status (vs. no status) because of greater group-serving (vs. self-focused) orientation. This can explain how legitimate low-status individuals’ generosity is comparable to the baseline generosity captured by equal status, but not to the baseline generosity captured by no status, which is relatively more self-focused and comparable to the generosity of legitimate high-status individuals. Overall, these results highlight the value of investigating multiple control conditions within hierarchy research.

The findings within our illegitimacy conditions indicate that all of our control conditions demonstrated the same degree of generosity as that found among our illegitimate, low-status condition (and significantly less generosity than our illegitimate, high-status condition). This suggests that our illegitimacy effects primarily reflect efforts by high-status individuals to calibrate their generosity to address the inequity of their overadvantage, rather than efforts by low-status individuals to calibrate their generosity to address the inequity of their underadvantage. This may reflect our theorizing that low-status individuals are less engaged in status dynamics or the group overall. Alternately, it is possible that illegitimate low-status individuals focus on alternate avenues, other than reduced generosity, to address their inequity. Additional research is needed to explore these possibilities, and should also explore whether these findings are consistent even when low status is associated with relatively more acute levels of disrespect than in our current research.

Thus far, our studies indicate that legitimate status decreases generosity, whereas illegitimate status increases generosity. However, these studies do not test our prediction about the role of equity concerns in explaining this interaction, the mechanism that we hypothesize. We therefore examine this aspect of our theorizing in Studies 4 and 5.

The Mediating Role of Equity Concerns

We conducted Studies 4 and 5 to test our prediction that equity concerns serve as the mediating mechanism that explains the interactive effects of status and legitimacy on generosity. To do so, we manipulated our mediating mechanism. Specifically, we varied whether participants were given an opportunity to resolve their concerns about inequity in the allocation of their status prior to making their generosity decisions. Our predicted mediating mechanism would be supported if, by providing participants an alternate opportunity to address inequity, the positive effect of illegitimate status on generosity was reduced or even reversed.

Our approach was based on the insight that concerns about inequity can be resolved through one of two routes: behaviorally or psychologically (Tyler et al., 1997). Although both routes fulfill people’s need to resolve inequitable situations, they do so through very different means. Behavioral equity restoration occurs when individuals act in ways that objectively restore equity, either by increasing their inputs to match their rewards (i.e., their outputs) or by decreasing the rewards they accept to a level that matches their inputs. In the domain of overadvantaged status, this would involve either increasing the value that one provides to a group (e.g., by increasing one’s group-oriented behavior or generosity) or attempting to decrease one’s status, perhaps by self-deprecation. Because status loss is aversive (Petit et al., 2010), people are more likely to pursue the former strategy (increasing their value to the group). Our theorizing reflects this approach, since we postulate that the positive effect of illegitimate status on generosity found in our prior studies reflects participants’ behavioral equity restoration efforts.

In contrast, psychological equity restoration occurs when individuals capitalize on information that enables them to construe a situation as equitable—that is, information that enables them to rationalize that their inputs are commensurate with their rewards. This approach addresses people’s drive for equity but precludes the need for behavioral equity restoration. Importantly, psychological equity restoration does not restore equity in an objective sense; rather, it is a rationalizing tool that creates a sense of equity without pursuing equity restoration through more tangible means. Thus, psychological equity restoration is a form of motivated reasoning because it involves processing information in a way that leads to a desired conclusion (Kunda, 1990). The overadvantaged often prefer psychological equity restoration because behavioral equity restoration can be quite costly and effortful for them, requiring them to increase their inputs or decrease the rewards they accept (Tyler et al., 1997). In the case of overadvantaged status, psychological equity restoration can involve seeking out and constructing evidence in a way that makes people feel they deserve the status they have. Psychological equity restoration can thus make behavioral equity restoration unnecessary. This is the premise of Studies 4 and 5, where we test our proposed mechanism by examining whether the behavioral equity restoration efforts that we find in our prior studies—that is, the generosity displayed by those with illegitimate high status—are diminished when participants are first provided a lower cost psychological means of equity restoration.

In Studies 4 and 5, we manipulated the availability of evidence that could be used to rationalize the deservingsness of one’s status position and examined whether this altered the effect of status on generosity. We reasoned that people with relatively lower status in an illegitimate hierarchy—that is, those who are underadvantaged—would not be motivated to use this rationalizing evidence because seeing oneself as deserving of low-status could be aversive, which runs contrary to the self-enhancement goals that typ-
ically characterize motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). However, as status increases, the motivation to construe evidence in a way that rationalizes one’s status position should increase, and thus the presence of rationalizing evidence will intervene to reduce the need for behavioral equity restoration efforts, such as generosity (Tyler et al., 1997). That is, we predict that the presence of rationalizing evidence will alter the level of generosity demonstrated by illegitimate, high-status individuals. Evidence that enables more compelling rationalizations will have a stronger moderating impact: Weaker rationalizations may attenuate the effects of illegitimate status, whereas stronger rationalizations may reverse the effects of illegitimate status. Moreover, we predict that the presence of rationalizing evidence will not have any effect when status is legitimate because there is no equity restoration drive in the first place. In Study 4, we only examine illegitimate hierarchies because these are the contexts in which we predict a moderating effect of psychological equity restoration. However, to provide a more comprehensive test of our reasoning, we examine both illegitimate and legitimate status hierarchies in Study 5.

Study 4

Study 4 examines the effect of providing participants with a basis for psychologically restoring equity subsequent to finding themselves in an illegitimate high- or low-status position, but prior to making decisions reflecting their level of generosity. We varied whether participants had an opportunity to construe their abilities in a way that would enable them to rationalize the deservingness of their status, despite the objective unfairness of the status allocation. We predicted that when participants were not given an opportunity to psychologically restore equity, we would find the same pattern of effects as in the previous studies: Illegitimate status would be positively related to generosity. However, when participants were provided tenuous evidence that could be seized upon to plausibly rationalize their status, we predicted that illegitimately high-status participants would use this evidence to psychologically restore equity and the positive effect of illegitimate status on generosity would be attenuated. Support for this prediction would corroborate our theorizing that equity concerns underlie the link between status, legitimacy, and generosity.

Method

Participants. One hundred thirty-nine (59 males) people recruited from Amazon MTurk participated in this study.

Procedure. Participants were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Status: high vs. low) × 2 (Psychological equity restoration: opportunity available vs. no opportunity). The design of this study is largely similar to Studies 2 and 3. Participants learned that they would work with two others who were currently participating in an interactive business-related task. One participant would be assigned to the high-status Idea Producer role and the other two would be assigned to the Worker roles (labeled X and Y for identification).

Participants then learned that they would complete two assessments: a business aptitude assessment and a contrast sensitivity test. The business aptitude assessment was explicitly described as a validated measure of the abilities needed to be successful in the high-status role and was thus a legitimate means for assigning roles. Therefore, roles in the business-related task would ostensibly be assigned based on this assessment, with the Idea Producer role assigned to the member of the group with the highest score on the assessment. The contrast sensitivity test (Wagner & Berger, 1982) was described as a measure of “visio-spatial” abilities where participants would evaluate six black and white images to decide whether the top half or bottom half contained more black. In all conditions, this test was ostensibly still in development and, as part of that process, was being piloted on participants in the current study. To provide a basis for the psychological restoration of equity to those who were motivated to seek one, the visio-spatial abilities that the contrast-sensitivity test aspired to measure were described as unrelated (in the no psychological equity rationalization opportunity condition) or related (in the psychological equity rationalization opportunity condition) to the business task. Even in the latter condition, however, because the test was still in development, it was not a legitimate basis for assigning roles. Therefore, participants had no basis to think that it would or should be used to assign roles, although someone who was actively seeking to rationalize the deservingness of his or her high status may nevertheless have construed it that way.

All participants then answered a series of business-related, multiple-choice questions and completed the contrast sensitivity test. After completing these two tasks, participants learned their scores on the business aptitude assessment and their roles for the interactive task. Because all conditions involved an illegitimate status hierarchy, all participants received roles that were inconsistent with their relative business assessment scores. As in the illegitimate condition of Study 2, participants received a message that the researchers needed an even number of males and females in the Idea Producer role and, unexpectedly, would assign roles based on gender instead of business aptitude. Participants either had the lowest score in their group but were assigned to the Idea Producer role on the basis of gender or they had the highest score but were assigned to one of the Worker roles on the basis of gender. Prior to learning their role assignment, participants also learned about their performance on the contrast sensitivity test, which always matched their position in the group’s status hierarchy—low scores for participants in the low-status conditions and high scores for participants in the high-status conditions. Specifically, participants in the low-status conditions learned that they had scored in the 10th percentile on the contrast sensitivity task, whereas participants in the high-status conditions learned that they had scored in the 90th percentile.

Next, participants learned that they would first complete a decision-making task in which they indicated their preference for allocation of resources among their group members. They completed the same point allocation task as used in Study 3, allocating 100 points among themselves and the other group members. We told participants that the points would be converted into lottery tickets at the end of the study for an additional bonus prize. As in Study 3, our measure of generosity is the sum of the points given to two other participants. To measure the effectiveness of our psychological equity restoration manipulation, which we developed for the purposes of this experiment, participants responded to a single item about the relevance of the contrast sensitivity test to the brainstorming task (“To what extent is your performance on the contrast sensitivity measure related to your performance in the Growth, Inc. task?”) on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (com-
pletely unrelated) to 7 (completely related) before being debriefed and dismissed. Participants were then asked to report any suspicions they had and were debriefed and dismissed; they did not complete the decision-making task.

Results

A 2 (status) × 2 (psychological equity restoration) ANOVA on our psychological equity restoration manipulation check revealed a main effect of psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 135) = 4.14, p = .044, \eta^2 = .03$, and a marginal effect of status, $F(1, 135) = 2.81, p = .096, \eta^2 = .02$, but no interaction of status and equity rationalization, $F(1, 135) = .35, p = .554$. Participants in the psychological equity restoration opportunity condition ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.72$) reported that the contrast sensitivity test was more relevant to the upcoming business task than did participants in the no psychological equity restoration opportunity condition ($M = 2.46, SD = 1.80$).

A 2 (status) × 2 (psychological equity restoration) ANOVA on our measure of generosity revealed no main effect of status, $F(1, 135) = 1.59, p = .209$, but a main effect of psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 135) = 6.90, p = .001, \eta^2 = .05$, and an interaction of status and psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 135) = 4.15, p = .044, \eta^2 = .03$ (see Figure 4). As predicted, and consistent with our prior findings, subsequent analysis revealed that in the no psychological equity restoration conditions, participants in the high-status condition were more generous ($M = 61.14, SD = 19.15$) than were participants in the low-status condition ($M = 47.37, SD = 22.10$), $F(1, 135) = 5.56, p = .020$. However, also as predicted, this effect was attenuated in the psychological equity restoration conditions. Specifically, there was no difference in generosity between participants in the high-status condition ($M = 41.68, SD = 29.92$) and those in the low-status condition ($M = 44.91, SD = 26.19$), $F(1, 135) = .29, p = .588$. Thus, when given an opportunity to psychologically restore equity, participants’ status was unrelated to generosity, providing support for our arguments regarding the role of equity concerns in explaining the link between status and generosity.6

Discussion

In this study, we found that providing participants with an opportunity to construe evidence in a way that could rationalize their status, thereby psychologically restoring equity, diminished their generosity, despite the fact that there was little objective basis for such rationalization. Indeed, although role assignments were based on an illegitimate standard like demographic quotas and it was clear that performance on the contrast sensitivity task should have no bearing on role assignments, our high-status participants appear to have latched onto the questionable relevance of the contrast sensitivity task to rationalize their status position and to have used this as a basis for legitimating their objectively over advantaged position. When the opportunity to psychologically restore equity was not made available to them, participants demonstrated the same pattern of generosity detected in our prior studies. Thus, this study provides evidence for the mediating role of equity concerns as we theorized. We note, however, that equity can be restored through means other than motivated construal of one’s credentials. For instance, people can also use a motivated construal of their behavior to rationalize their status. Study 5 explores this alternative means of psychological equity restoration to determine whether it likewise attenuates the relationship between status and generosity in illegitimate status hierarchies. Moreover, we also examined the effect of having the opportunity to psychologically restore equity in legitimate hierarchies.

Study 5

We designed this study to examine the effect of providing an opportunity to psychologically restore equity using a different means than in Study 4 and did so in both illegitimate and legitimate hierarchies. In this study, participants were asked to engage in a mundane task and were told that they could spend up to (but no more than) 5 min on the task, in exchange for points that accrued either to themselves or to their groups. These characteristics made it unlikely that task effort would be viewed as a viable way to behaviorally restore equity. Specifically, the mundane nature of the task is inconsistent with the schema for how high-status individuals contribute to their groups—the task did not require competence or involve respected inputs—yet behavioral equity restoration involves inputs that relate to the nature of one’s overadvantage (Adams, 1965). That is, individuals seeking to behaviorally address overadvantage will tend to focus on actions that clearly justify their high-status position rather than on menial actions or activities because they are not typically the basis for status conferral. Moreover, the task did not provide a significant opportunity to highlight or differentiate one’s commitment or contributions to the group because it involved broad participation by all group members and anchored participants on a brief, upper-bound of effort that they likely expected most other participants to meet (and, moreover, could not be exceeded). In addition, points that accrued to the group could yield benefits (a lottery prize) that would be distributed equally among all group members, including

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6 Two participants were suspicious about the legitimacy manipulation, and 13 participants were suspicious about the presence of other participants. Excluding these participants slightly weakens our interaction ($p = .068$), but the reported contrast between high and low status in the no equity restoration opportunity conditions remains significant ($p = .013$).
to oneself, thus diminishing their self-sacrificial nature and equity-restoring ability. On the other hand, individuals motivated to psychologically restore equity by rationalizing their overadvantage could potentially set these considerations aside and instead focus on their task effort as rationalizing evidence that they had restored equity, at least when such rationalization was plausible (i.e., when points accrued to the group). In contrast, such rationalization would not be plausible when points earned from the task accrued to oneself.

For participants in the illegitimate status conditions, we expected that when benefits from the mundane task did not benefit the group, status would have a positive effect on generosity as in previous studies. When the benefits from the mundane task accrued to the group, task effort could be seized upon as a basis to rationalize overadvantage, thereby psychologically restoring equity and attenuating or reversing the positive effect of status on generosity. As described earlier, we further expected that the opportunity to construe the mundane task as status-relevant would not be seized upon by individuals with legitimate status and would not alter the negative effect of legitimate status on generosity, because in this case individuals already perceive their status to be equitable and such an opportunity is irrelevant to them.

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred twenty-nine students (80 males) at a large university enrolled in an organizational behavior course participated in the study.

**Procedure.** Participants were assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (status: high vs. low) × 2 (legitimacy: legitimate vs. illegitimate) × 2 (psychological equity restoration: opportunity available vs. no opportunity) design. All participants first read a cover story that was very similar to that used in our prior studies. Specifically, instructions stated that participants would work with two other people who were accessing the online study materials at the same time in an online chatroom interface on a business-related task. One participant would have the high-status Idea Producer role and the others would have the low-status Worker roles. Roles would be assigned based on relative performance on a business aptitude assessment. Unlike Study 4, there was no secondary assessment (i.e., no contrast sensitivity test). Participants then completed the business assessment and learned their role assignments. As in prior studies, roles were either ostensibly based on relative business assessment scores (in the legitimate conditions) or unexpectedly on the basis of gender (in the illegitimate conditions).

Next, participants were instructed that they would first complete a numerical accuracy task being piloted for an unrelated research project. In this task, they would need to review a series of tables and, for each table, compare two columns of numbers and identify the number of discrepancies (see Trope & Liberman, 2000). For each table where they successfully identified the number of discrepancies between the columns, participants would receive 10 lottery tickets for the chance to win an additional bonus prize. In the psychological equity restoration opportunity conditions, participants learned that they were working as part of a group (although they were working individually on the task), and the lottery tickets earned would be given to the group. If the group won the lottery, the bonus prize of $60 would be divided evenly among the three group members and each person would receive $20. In the no psychological equity restoration opportunity conditions, instructions stated that participants were working individually and the lottery tickets earned would be given to them individually. If won, the participant would receive a bonus prize of $20. That is, participants worked on the task for either an individual or group-based incentive; the latter provided them an opportunity to rationalize that they had contributed something of value to the group, enabling the motivated reasoning through which they could rationalize inequitable overadvantage, whereas the former did not. Participants were provided 5 min to work on the task.

After completing the boring task, participants completed an allocation task where they allocated 100 “lab dollars” (Pettit et al., 2010) among themselves and the two other group members. These lab dollars could purportedly be used during the subsequent business task. We use the number of lab dollars allocated to the two other group members as our measure of generosity. After the allocation task, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

### Results

A 2 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) × 2 (psychological equity restoration) ANOVA on our measure of generosity revealed main effects of status, $F(1, 221) = 8.33, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$, and legitimacy, $F(1, 221) = 6.19, p = .014, \eta^2 = .03$, but no main effect of psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 221) = .00, p = .995$. More importantly, however, the analysis revealed interactions between status and legitimacy, $F(1, 221) = 4.73, p = .031, \eta^2 = .02$, status and psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 221) = 6.80, p = .010, \eta^2 = .03$, and a three-way interaction, $F(1, 221) = 13.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ (see Figure 5). There was no interaction between legitimacy and psychological equity restoration, $F(1, 221) = .45, p = .503$. Subsequent analysis revealed that, within the no psychological equity restoration opportunity conditions, we replicated the pattern of effects from previous studies. Specifically, participants in the legitimate high-status condition ($M = 58.28, SD = 11.83$) were less generous than were participants in the legitimate low-status condition ($M = 69.79, SD = 9.10$), $F(1, 221) = 8.53, p = .004$, but participants in the illegitimate high-status condition ($M = 65.81, SD = 8.73$) were more generous than participants in the illegitimate low-status condition ($M = 58.28, SD = 11.83$).

![Figure 5](image-url)  
*Figure 5. Generosity in point allocation measure as a function of status, legitimacy, and psychological equity restoration opportunity (Study 5).*
were participants in the illegitimate low-status condition (\(M = 55.36, SD = 25.80\)), \(F(1, 221) = 7.74, p = .006\). When participants had an opportunity to psychologically restore equity, however, participants in the illegitimate high-status condition (\(M = 52.75, SD = 22.99\)) were less generous than were participants in the illegitimate low-status condition (\(M = 65.90, SD = 4.40\)), \(F(1, 221) = 12.23, p < .001\). As expected, participants in the legitimate high-status condition (\(M = 61.47, SD = 6.31\)) continued to be less generous than were participants in the legitimate low-status condition (\(M = 69.17, SD = 4.23\)), \(F(1, 221) = 4.27, p = .040\).

As noted in the study introduction, we expected that effort on the boring task would be seized upon as rationalizing evidence by those seeking to resolve the inequity of their overadvantaged status, at least when plausible (i.e., when points accrued to the group). This is because the task was mundane, provided little opportunity to positively differentiate oneself from others through one’s efforts, and could lead to benefits for oneself. However, despite these characteristics, participants may nevertheless have seen the task as a behavioral, rather than psychological, means of restoring equity. That is, perhaps those with overadvantaged status worked longer on the task, working to behaviorally restore equity when task effort resulted in a contribution to the group (i.e., lottery tickets). Notably, this would still be consistent with our theorizing that resolving inequity can mitigate or reverse the positive effect of illegitimate status on generosity. We therefore conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether the boring task was used as a behavioral equity restoration opportunity. Specifically, we analyzed the effect of our manipulations on the total time spent on the boring task. Although we found a main effect of psychological equity restoration, \(F(1, 221) = 4.46, p = .036, \eta^2 = .02\), such that participants spent more time on the task in the opportunity available condition (\(M = 271.08\) seconds, \(SD = 63.70\)) than in the no opportunity condition (\(M = 250.03\) seconds, \(SD = 78.38\)), there were no other main or interactive effects (legitimacy: \(F(1, 221) = 2.33, p = .128\); three-way interaction: \(F(1, 221) = 1.21, p = .273\); other Fs < 1).

**Discussion**

In this study, we extended Study 4 by examining the effect of offering an opportunity to justify one’s status when one’s high or low status was either legitimate or illegitimate. Consistent with our theorizing and the prior study that examined illegitimate status related task. We also measured participants’ concerns about status as an important exchange, and to be concerned about the equity of that exchange (Blader & Chen, 2011). Status concerns are not simply about the desire to attain status, but rather they describe the psychological importance of status and thus the likelihood of focusing on status dynamics. Therefore, the equity or inequity of one’s status should be particularly salient when status concerns are strong, and thus strong status concerns should accentuate our predicted interactive effects of status and legitimacy on generosity.

**Method**

**Participants.** Two hundred sixty-four students (28% males) at a large university participated in the study.

**Design and procedure.** Participants were assigned to one of 12 conditions in a 2 (status: high vs. low) × 2 (legitimacy: legitimate vs. illegitimate) × 3 (stability: no role reassignment, experimenter-determined reassignment, peer-determined reassignment) design. We included both experimenter and peer-determined reassignment conditions to conduct a more comprehensive test of the role of stability because both peers and authorities can be involved in status conferral and thus both can be sources of status (in)stability. The design was similar to our earlier studies except that, to enable us to manipulate stability of roles, participants were led to believe that they would complete a two-phase business-related task. We also measured participants’ concerns about status to test our prediction that the interactive effects of status and legitimacy on generosity would be strongest when status concerns are relatively higher (Blader & Chen, 2011).
As in the previous studies, participants believed they would work with others on a business-related task. To manipulate hierarchy stability, instructions in this study stated that participants would work on two client engagements. For each engagement, one participant would have the role of Idea Producer and the other two would have Worker roles. Roles in the first engagement would be assigned on the basis of a business assessment. Participants in the no reassignment condition learned that they would have the same role for both engagements. Participants in the experimenter-determined condition learned that the experimenters would determine role assignments for the second task. Participants in the peer-determined condition learned that the group would vote after the first engagement on who would have which roles for the second engagement. After participants completed the business assessment, role assignments for the first engagement were made in the same manner as the previous experiments, either based on purported test performance (legitimate conditions) or unexpectedly on the basis of gender (illegitimate conditions).

After learning initial role assignments, participants completed an allocation task where they allocated 1,000 points that could be exchanged for lottery tickets among themselves and the other two group members; our measure of generosity is again points allocated to others. Participants next responded to five items (α = .74) (adapted from Blader & Chen, 2011) that assessed the degree of concerns about their status in the situation on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items included “I will react very negatively if my status is challenged by other group members,” “I will be very sensitive to whether I feel my status is being threatened during my interactions with group members,” “I will find it upsetting if my group members do not seem to think the same of my status as I do,” “I will not be concerned with how my status compares to other group members” (reversed), and “I will not care about what my group members think about my status” (reversed).

To verify the success of our stability manipulation, which was novel to this study, participants next responded to three items (α = .82) on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Stability items included “It is possible for roles to change between the first and second tasks,” “The role assignments are likely to change prior to the second engagement,” and “People can lose or fail to obtain the Idea Producer role if they don’t perform well.” Finally, participants were asked to report any suspicions they had about the study and were debriefed and dismissed; they did not complete the decision-making task.

Results

A 2 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) × 3 (stability) ANOVA revealed a main effect of stability, \( F(1, 252) = 10.95, p < .001 \), \( \eta^2 = .08 \), but no main effects of status, \( F(1, 252) = 1.41, p = .237 \), legitimacy, \( F(1, 252) = .25, p = .620 \), or any interactions (three-way interaction \( F(1, 252) = 1.74, p = .177 \), other Fs < 1) on our hierarchy stability manipulation check. Participants in the no reassignment condition saw the hierarchy as more stable (\( M = 3.37, SD = 1.71 \)) than did participants in the experimenter-determined condition (\( M = 2.64, SD = .83 \)), \( F(1, 252) = 15.62, p < .001 \), and the peer-determined condition (\( M = 2.56, SD = .98 \)), \( F(1, 252) = 18.71, p < .001 \). The latter two conditions did not differ, \( F(1, 252) = .16, p = .691 \).

A 2 (status) × 2 (legitimacy) × 3 (stability) ANOVA revealed no main effects of status, \( F(1, 252) = .07, p = .798 \), legitimacy, \( F(1, 252) = .34, p = .561 \), or stability, \( F(1, 252) = .17, p = .840 \). Moreover, consistent with our theorizing, stability did not interact with any of the other independent variables (three-way interaction: \( F(1, 252) = 1.08, p = .343 \); other Fs < 1); the only significant interaction was between status and legitimacy, \( F(1, 252) = 8.61, p = .004 \), \( \eta^2 = .03 \). Subsequent analysis revealed that the pattern of the interaction was consistent with our predictions. Participants in the legitimate high-status condition were less generous with their group members (\( M = 527.55, SD = 157.96 \)) than were participants in the legitimate low-status condition (\( M = 596.16, SD = 222.54 \)), \( F(1, 252) = 3.56, p = .060 \). Conversely, participants in the illegitimate high-status condition were more generous (\( M = 588.35, SD = 175.85 \)) than were those in the illegitimate low-status condition (\( M = 506.17, SD = 252.59 \)), \( F(1, 252) = 5.14, p = .024 \). Because stability had no main or interactive effects on generosity, we collapsed across levels of this factor for subsequent analysis.

To examine the interaction of our manipulated variables with the status concerns measure, we regressed our generosity measure on status, legitimacy, status concerns (standardized), and all possible interactions among variables. Detailed results appear in Table 2. Of greatest importance, we find a significant three-way interaction of legitimacy, status, and status concerns, \( B = -123.09, \beta = -.30, p = .019 \). We examined the effect of status within the legitimate and illegitimate conditions for participants high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) in status concerns (see Figure 6; Aiken & West, 1991). As expected, for people who reported greater status concerns, status decreased generosity in the legitimate condition (\( B = -150.69, p = .005 \)) but increased generosity in the illegitimate condition (\( B = 119.70, p = .015 \)). For people who reported lower status concerns, status did not affect generosity in legitimate (\( B = 10.19, p = .844 \)) or illegitimate (\( B = 34.40, p = .502 \)) conditions. Thus, we only replicated our focal interaction (also found in Studies 1, 2, 3, and 5) among people who reported having relatively strong status concerns, consistent with our prediction that status concerns heighten focus on the equity of the social exchange processes that underlie status conferral.

Discussion

In this study, we manipulated hierarchy stability in addition to status and legitimacy to examine an alternative explanation for our previous findings, specifically whether the moderating effect of legitimacy is due to its effect on hierarchy stability. We found no evidence of this alternative. That is, hierarchy stability did not

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7 One participant was suspicious about the legitimacy manipulation and nine participants were suspicious about the presence of other participants. The Status × Legitimacy interaction remains significant after excluding these participants (\( p = .004 \)). The reported contrast between the illegitimate high- and low-status conditions becomes marginal (\( p = .051 \)), but the contrast between the legitimate high and low-status conditions becomes significant (\( p = .030 \)).

8 Our status concerns measure was unaffected by our manipulations (all ps > .16).

9 The interaction remains significant after excluding participants who expressed suspicion (\( p = .027 \)), and all reported contrasts remain significant (\( p < .05 \)).
have main or interactive effects on generosity, nor did it change the pattern of the interaction of status and legitimacy, suggesting that it is not the mechanism underlying our effects. Although any null effect must be interpreted with caution, our attempt to manipulate stability in two different ways and the overall pattern of significant results in this study suggests that the null findings for stability may support our theorizing. Furthermore, we found that the effects of status and legitimacy are strongest (and, in fact, only significant) for people highest in status concerns who are most likely to be monitoring the exchange dynamics associated with status. This is consistent with our reasoning that status tends to orient people outwardly (at least for those who are concerned about status) and that the interactive effect of status and legitimacy on generosity is related to concerns people have about the equity of their status positions.

General Discussion

Consistent with our theorizing, we found in six studies that legitimate status decreases generosity but that illegitimate status increases generosity. These studies support our prediction that legitimate status decreases generosity because individuals’ equity concerns are satisfied, creating a context in which other factors associated with status, such as inflated views of one’s value, can affect one’s level of generosity. In contrast, illegitimate status increases generosity by creating a sense of inequity and a subsequent drive to restore equity. Our theorized equity mechanism is further supported by our finding that the negative effect of illegitimate status on generosity is either eliminated or reversed following opportunities to restore equity psychologically. Moreover, the interactive effects of status and legitimacy were strongest for individuals high in status concerns, and emerged regardless of hierarchy stability. Complementing previous work indicating that generosity leads to status increases (Flynn et al., 2006; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009), we find that once an individual has obtained high status, the legitimacy of that status determines whether he or she tends to behave more or less generously than low-status group members.

To further verify the robustness and magnitude of our results, we conducted a meta-analysis on our five experiments. This was particularly important in light of the sample sizes in our studies, which were limited by constraints in the availability of student participants and the extensive number of conditions in some of our studies. This meta-analysis includes participants in the four conditions that were consistent across all experiments: legitimate high-status, legitimate low-status, illegitimate high-status, and illegitimate low-status (we only included the no equity restoration conditions from Studies 4 and 5 to be parallel with the other studies). Specifically, following Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, and Rothstein (2009), we conducted random-effects meta-analyses of our studies, calculating Cohen’s $d$ standardized mean differences for each comparison and estimating between-study effect size variance using the DerSimonian and Laird (1986) method. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that all pairwise simple effects are significant.

We make a number of important contributions to the literature on social status. First, this research contributes to a small but growing body of work on the psychological experience of status. Although a significant amount of research exists on the experience of power, the same is not true for status. Our work complements previous work on status, suggesting that status tends to orient people outwardly to their relationships with others (Blader & Chen, 2012; Blader et al., 2016). This is consistent with the conferred and exchanged nature of status: Because people are reliant on others to confer status to them, they must be mindful of their relationships with others and others’ impressions of them. This, in turn, brings equity concerns to the foreground, which in turn shape the relationship between status and generosity.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>77.05*</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy</td>
<td>82.93*</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status $\times$ Legitimacy</td>
<td>-147.30**</td>
<td>- .31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status concerns</td>
<td>-44.10†</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status $\times$ Status concerns</td>
<td>42.65</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy $\times$ Status concerns</td>
<td>93.52*</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status $\times$ Legitimacy $\times$ Status concerns</td>
<td>-123.09*</td>
<td>-.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>511.30**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$F$ 7.252
$df$ 7, 256
Adjusted $R^2$ .04

$p < .10$. $* p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.  

Figure 6. Generosity in point allocation measure as a function of status, legitimacy, and status concerns (Study 6).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>Effect of status</th>
<th>Effect of legitimacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$d$</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>-.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$z$</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low status</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>-.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High status</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$Note$. These figures are adjusted using Cohen’s correction to $d$, with between-study variance calculated using the DerSimonian and Laird (1986) method.
Our work also suggests that the psychological experience of status is distinct from that of power and SES. Whereas status orients people outwardly to their relationships with others, power and SES tend to orient people inwardly to themselves and their own goals, among those with high rank (Galinsky et al., 2006; Piff et al., 2012; Rucker et al., 2011). Furthermore, although power and SES are also moderated by legitimacy, this is due to concerns over the instability created by illegitimacy (Hays & Goldstein, 2015; Lammers et al., 2008), and the subsequent steps that powerful or high-SES people take are to maintain their positions of privilege (Chow et al., 2013; Maner & Mead, 2010; Williams, 2014). In contrast, the present research suggests that equity concerns are central to understanding how and why legitimacy moderates the effect of status on generosity. Instability may play less of a role in the interaction of status and legitimacy because the relative mutability of status compared with power (Hays & Bendersky, 2015) makes instability a chronic concern. These differences between status, power, and SES may foreshadow a variety of other important consequences of having high rank in a status hierarchy versus hierarchies based on other dimensions, such as power or SES. For example, someone who has obtained a powerful position through illegitimate means such as cronyism or misrepresented credentials is likely to behave similarly to someone with legitimate power as long as the individual feels his or her position is secure. Moreover, he or she will tend to react to perceived threats of instability through selfishness. In contrast, someone who holds an advanced status position based on illegitimate premises is likely to try to justify his or her position irrespective of its stability, reflecting their prosocial concerns about equity rather than their selfish concerns about stability.

Second, our theorizing suggests that the negative effect of legitimate status on generosity does not reflect a self-interested, conscious reversal of the generosity they may have exhibited to acquire status (Flynn et al., 2006). Rather, our theorizing implies that legitimately high-status individuals feel that their reduced generosity is justified and deserved due to an inflated sense of their value to the group. Third, our work also has implications for research on groups and teams, because status hierarchies are prevalent in all types of groups (Bales, 1958). Our work suggests that the trappings that accompany high status in many groups may, in turn, prompt an inflated sense of deservingness among high-status group members, which is ultimately quite costly to those groups. Moreover, it seems likely that groups characterized by highly competitive environments, grueling evaluations and socialization processes, and winner-take-all reward systems will instill an exaggerated sense of status among those who succeed, and in turn may foster a costly sense of deservingness among their most important and influential members. Thus, despite the many benefits of legitimate hierarchies, including allocation of disproportionate influence to the most agentic, competent, and group-oriented members, there may be counterintuitive and perverse effects of systems that lead high-status members to have an exaggerated sense of deservingness.

Importantly, although illegitimate high-status can lead individuals to be particularly generous, we do not believe that all high-status individuals who are generous necessarily feel that their positions are illegitimate. There are many situational and dispositional factors that may interact with status to influence individuals’ level of generosity. For example, people who attribute their high status to good luck or good fortune may likewise show a tendency to be generous to others. It is also important to recognize that high-status individuals may be generous purely out of self-interested motivations (Kafashan et al., 2014), recognizing that they are key role models for a group’s generosity, and moreover that their high-status rank positions them to reap many of the rewards and benefits that accrue to those groups whose members are highly generous. As noted in the following text, we feel that other factors that influence one’s level of generosity are worthy of future research.

It is important to reconcile our findings with related prior research. For instance, Willer (2009, Study 4) finds that status increases contributions to a public goods game. We only find the pattern reported by Willer (2009) among our illegitimate status conditions, yet there is little reason to suspect that illegitimacy accounts for Willer’s findings. However, one key difference between our work and the Willer (2009) study is that public goods contributions also benefit the contributor (especially so, perhaps, for high-status contributors), and as such they are not directly equivalent to generosity. This distinction notwithstanding, another critical factor is that status conferral in Willer (2009) was based on an individual’s contributions to the group, whereas our studies confer status on the basis of competence. It is possible that when an individual attains status based on generosity (but not on other bases, such as competence), he or she may continue to act generously because of others’ expectations about their typical generosity as well as their own self-schemas as generous people. This highlights that the bases of one’s status may be critical in understanding that individual’s subsequent behavior. Another noteworthy difference is that the contributions in Willer (2009) were relatively more public than in our current studies. Because public decisions face greater scrutiny and involve greater accountability, they may encourage the tendency to act in accordance with others’ expectations and to be less affected by inflated self-views and feelings of deservingness. Future research is needed to explore these possibilities and, more generally, to address differences between our findings and those of Willer (2009, Study 4).

We also note two limitations in the present research. One limitation relates to the potential but unexamined role of power in our studies. Because status and power often co-occur in real-world settings, it is possible that measuring status could have also captured participants’ power, and manipulating status could also have affected participants’ sense of power. Although this is possible, we are somewhat less concerned about the conflating role of power in our studies for three reasons. First, given that prior research attributes the interactive effects of power and legitimacy to instability, if power were responsible for our findings then we would expect to find a moderating impact of stability, which we examined in Study 6 but did not find. Instead, we find that equity concerns underlie our effects, a finding that we would not expect for power given its inwardly orienting effects (Galinsky et al., 2006; van Kleef et al., 2008). Second, we found that our results were accentuated among individuals high in status concerns, suggesting that concerns about how one is viewed by others (which are central to status) underlie our findings. This is also inconsistent with the effects of power, which diminishes focus on how one is viewed by others (Blader et al., 2016). Third, we find that illegitimate status enhances generosity, which likewise...
differs from the self-serving, generally antisocial reactions that are elicited when power is illegitimate and perceived to be threatened. Nevertheless, future research should directly compare the effects of status and power on generosity, including their distinct mechanisms.

A second limitation relates to the mechanism underlying the negative effect of legitimate status on generosity. We posit that legitimate status hierarchies address concerns about the equity of one’s status, creating a context in which other factors shape the effect of status on generosity. Moreover, on the basis of prior research on the outwardly orienting effect of status as well as the overly positive evaluations of high-status individuals, we reason that inflated perceptions of one’s value affect perceived deservingness in ways that diminish generosity. This is different from power, which prompts an egocentric focus and is theorized as operating through perceived entitlement rather than perceived deservingness (Feather, 1999, 2003). Entitlements refer to outcomes that are construed as invariant rights of one’s position, irrespective of one’s contributions. In contrast, deservingness links outcomes to one’s tangible actions and value-add to the group. This difference makes a difference. For instance, legitimate high-status individuals’ relative selfishness can perhaps be attenuated by prompting them to reflect more systematically about the proportionality of their contributions and outcomes. In contrast, high power parties’ sense of entitlement and subsequent selfishness will be far more robust and efforts to encourage them to regulate their selfishness will be unlikely to succeed, since rights are construed as inalienable privileges that require little justification. However, our studies do not provide direct evidence of inflated perceptions of one’s value or sense of deservingness resulting from legitimate high status. Additional research is needed to more closely investigate the mechanisms that underlie the impact of legitimate status on generosity, and to differentiate those mechanisms from those related to power.

Our research also raises a number of noteworthy questions. First, while our research focuses on the role of legitimacy in shaping the link between status and generosity, we think it is important to investigate other variables that may cause high-status people to be particularly generous or selfish. As highlighted earlier, there are many examples of high-status people behaving in particularly generous or selfish ways, and likely multiple factors that shape the calculus of high-status individuals’ generosity decisions. For example, prior research has found that power can lead to prosocial behaviors for individuals who are communally oriented but relatively more selfish behavior for those who are exchange oriented (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). It is possible that exchange and communal orientation also moderate the effects of status. Other traits, such as moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), may also interact with status, perhaps by shaping perceptions of prototypical behavior for high-status individuals. Furthermore, characteristics of situations—such as the public versus private nature of specific generosity decisions—may also interact with status. Since people behave quite strategically when it comes to attaining or maintaining status (Willer et al., 2013), people interacting in settings where generosity decisions are visible to others may behave more generously. Furthermore, to the extent that high-status people are more vested in the success of the group, they may seek to model generosity in public settings to encourage others to contribute generously as well.

Second, although we examined the interaction of legitimacy and status on its own (and prior work has investigated the interaction of power and legitimacy), it is interesting to consider potential interactions of status, power, and legitimacy, consistent with prior research showing that power and status can have interactive effects (Blader & Chen, 2012; Fast et al., 2012). Thus, future research should examine whether power alters the interaction of status and legitimacy on generosity. For instance, perhaps high power accentuates the negative effect of legitimate status on generosity. Indeed, people who possess legitimate high status and high power are likely to be particularly selfish because they feel deserving of more (an effect of status) and because they are less concerned about others (an effect of power). In contrast, high power may attenuate the positive impact of illegitimate status on generosity, at least to the extent that it accentuates self-focus and thus diminishes equity concerns. Future research is needed to investigate these issues and, more generally, to further develop our understanding of how various hierarchical bases interact with one another.

Finally, the relative selfishness of legitimately high-status individuals raises questions about the long-term effects of such self-oriented behavior. Research indicates that powerful individuals may overestimate the degree to which others support them, leading to their eventual downfall (Brion & Anderson, 2013). To the extent that legitimately high-status individuals’ inflated self-views lead them to be excessively presumptuous about their deservingness and the longevity of their status position, their relative selfishness may eventually lead to status loss. Future research should examine whether, in the long run, legitimately high-status individuals continue to demonstrate the self-oriented behaviors that we find in these studies. If so, does this erode their status position? Or does their outward orientation prompt them to sense others’ negative reactions, prompting strategic increases in generosity to avoid potential status loss? More generally, we hope that future research continues to investigate, and enhance our understanding of, the psychological experience of status.

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Interactive Effects of Status and Legitimacy


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INTERACTIVE EFFECTS OF STATUS AND LEGITIMACY


Received May 8, 2015
Revision received May 22, 2016
Accepted May 24, 2016