

# The Influence of Status on Decisions to Help

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**ABSTRACT.** Schemas influence interpersonal judgments in ways that can affect behavior toward members of various social categories. In this study, the “wrong number” technique was used to examine the effect of social status on U.S. subjects’ decisions to help. The independent variables were the help requester’s occupational status (lawyer, gas station attendant, or unspecified) and the helper’s socioeconomic status (high or low median neighborhood income). Overall, 62.1% of the subjects helped by making a phone call. Although frequency of help was not affected by the helper’s status,  $\chi^2(1, N = 240) = 0.64, p > .05$ , it was affected by the requester’s status. Lawyers and requesters with unspecified occupational status received help significantly more often than gas station attendants,  $\chi^2(2, N = 240) = 14.90, p < .05$ . This finding did not support a “similarity effect” in helping.

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THE IMPRESSIONS A PERSON HAS of others are often influenced by social schemas, or mental representations of social categories. Once a person has been judged as fitting a particular category, schemas about members of that group may affect expectations, memory, inferences, and judgments about that person. In Darley and Gross’s (1983) study, American teachers predicted poorer academic performance for a lower class child than for a middle-class child, despite receiving the same school-relevant background information about each. Teachers justified these divergent predictions by selectively citing evidence confirming their hypotheses, which were apparently based on schemas about socioeconomic status (SES); it seems that one component of the schema for low-SES students is that they perform poorly in school.

Because schemas affect a variety of interpersonal judgments, it is reasonable to expect behavior toward members of a certain social category to be

affected as well. Research has shown that behavior in interviewing or "getting-acquainted" situations is influenced by the perceiver's schemas about extraversion (Snyder & Swann, 1978), physical attractiveness (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977), and race (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974), among other social categories. Once perceivers have classified a target person as a member of a particular social category, their behavior toward that person changes in subtle ways that are guided by their schemas about that "type" of person. These behavioral changes, although slight, are hardly trivial; they can actually elicit behavior from targets that confirms the perceivers' initial expectations. These findings suggest that expectations about category members can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Schemas may also affect more visible and concrete behavior, such as helping. These effects may be mediated by schema-guided judgments about people who request help. With the exception of the Darley and Gross (1983) study, few studies have been focused on schemas about social status. There have been several studies on helping and social status, but typically they have been concerned with similarity, using social status as the operational definition of similarity between help requesters and helpers. In the present study, social status information was assumed to activate larger schemas that may affect helping behavior.

Several American studies have demonstrated the effect of apparent status on observers' behavior. For instance, Bickman (1971) manipulated the apparent occupational status of requesters by varying their attire. Confederates who were dressed as either white-collar or blue-collar workers left a dime in a phone booth and then returned to ask subsequent users if they had found it. One might expect subjects to assume that blue-collar workers have a greater need for the dime; nevertheless, the subjects returned dimes to 77% of the high-status requesters and to only 38% of the low-status requesters. Although observers rated helper status on the basis of the way subjects were dressed, this variable had no effect on helping. Thus, Bickman's study offered no support for a similarity effect, in which helpers would be expected to assist requesters who matched their own social status.

Solomon and Herman (1977) found comparable results when they operationalized status as the type of car the requester drove. A female confederate

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dropped a bag of groceries while loading the trunk of either a high- or a low-status car. She was helped by 53% of the passersby in the high-status condition and by 23% in the low-status condition. The authors did not examine the status of actual or potential helpers.

In India, Pandey (1979) examined the effects of helper and requester status (operationalized in a campus setting as faculty member and graduate student) on donations to a fund for flood victims. As in previous studies, high-status requesters received more donations. In addition, high-status helpers donated more money.

Although this contrasts with Bickman's (1971) finding that helper status had no effect, helping in Pandey's study involved donating money. Faculty members may simply have more money to donate than typically impecunious graduate students. On the other hand, Bickman's study involved returning a dime left by a confederate; hence, there is no reason to expect high- and low-status subjects to differ in their ability to carry out this task.

Although the previously cited studies demonstrate that high-status requesters are helped more often, Yinon, Dovrat, and Avni (1981) in Israel were unable to replicate the effect of requester status when it was operationalized as occupational prestige. By using the "wrong number" technique (Gaertner & Bickman, 1971), an experimenter asked subjects to call his employer to say that he would be late. His stated occupation varied in status and in the degree to which it was seen as prosocially motivated. Occupational status had no effect, but members of "helping" professions received help more often at every status level. Yinon and his colleagues explained this finding in terms of the potential that the helping occupations have for arousing reciprocity, and they suggested that either occupational prestige does not affect subjects' helping behavior as other status manipulations do or the reciprocity-arousing information conveyed by occupation is so powerful that it cancels out the effect of status.

To determine whether occupational status alone is sufficient to produce different levels of help, we used high- and low-status occupations (lawyer and gas station attendant) with similar (low) reciprocity-arousing potential and perceived prosocial motivation. We predicted that the high-status requesters would receive more help than the low-status requesters. The status information conveyed by these occupations may have activated schemas that influenced the perceivers' judgments of the legitimacy of the request; in turn, these legitimacy judgments might affect the perceivers' decisions about whether to help.

Although it was of secondary concern in this study, we thought that an examination of helper status would be useful because previous results concerning this variable have been rather inconsistent. However, to avoid confounding status with actual ability to help—which was a strong possibility in the Pandey (1979) study—we used a form of helping that was equally simple

for high- and low-status subjects to perform: making a free local telephone call for the requester. Helper SES was operationalized in terms of the median income level of the helper's neighborhood.

## Method

### *Subjects and Design*

The study used a  $3 \times 2$  Requester Occupational Status (lawyer, gas station attendant, or unspecified)  $\times$  Helper SES (high SES or low SES) factorial design. Two hundred forty residents of two urban U.S. neighborhoods were selected on the basis of median income levels (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). According to census data, the racial composition of each tract is representative of the U.S. population.

Subjects from each area were selected from a source that listed telephone numbers by address (Cole Publications, 1989). Of the subjects, 99 were men and 141 were women. This proportion of male to female subjects was similar across all six conditions.

### *Procedure*

The high and low levels of requester occupational status were selected on the basis of ratings made by Nam and Powers's (1983) rating system, which ranks occupations on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 based on the median income and median educational level of all holders of a particular job. The occupations chosen were lawyer, with a rating of 99, and gas station attendant, with a rating of 20.

Helper status was operationalized by selecting two neighborhoods with differing median income levels based on census tract data. To avoid confounding income level with the ethnic composition of the neighborhoods, we first matched tracts on ethnic mix. Of all tracts that met the matching criterion, the selected tracts showed the largest difference in median income level. The high-SES neighborhood had a median income of \$17,455, whereas the low-SES neighborhood had a median income of \$10,867 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Although this income difference does not appear very large, the neighborhoods are strikingly different in appearance. The low-SES neighborhood is composed largely of apartment buildings and multifamily dwellings, and the high-SES neighborhood is made up of single-family houses with yards.

The "wrong number" technique (Gaertner & Bickman, 1971) was used to solicit help. The callers were two men and two women who split calls evenly across the six conditions. Subjects were telephoned between 12:30

p.m. and 5:00 p.m. on three Sundays. Callers pretended to have reached a wrong number while using their last dime in a pay phone. Subjects were asked to phone the caller's workplace, which was described as either a law office or a gas station, to give the message that the caller would be late. No specific excuse was given.

In the control condition, the requester's occupation was unspecified. Subjects were asked to call the requester's home. Those who agreed to call were given the requester's name and a phone number. All calls were answered by a confederate who posed as the employer or relative of the requester. There were no differences in the amount of help given to different requesters.

Almost all subjects stayed on the telephone long enough to hear the caller's occupational status and the request for help. The few<sup>1</sup> who hung up did so before even hearing the caller's occupational status, so that they were not exposed to the manipulation; these subjects were dropped. Subjects who actually made the call and gave the message were counted as helpers, and those who refused to do so were considered nonhelpers. Four subjects who agreed to make the call but did not actually do so were also scored as nonhelpers.

## Results

Across conditions, 62.1% of the subjects made the call. Because frequency of help was not affected by the requester's or the potential helper's sex, this variable was dropped from subsequent analyses.

The percentage of actual helpers from each condition is shown in Table 1. Frequency of help was not affected by the SES of potential helpers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 240) = 0.64, p > .05$ . However, there was a significant effect of requester occupational status,  $\chi^2(2, N = 240) = 14.90, p = .0006$ . As

TABLE 1  
Number of Subjects Who Helped in Each Condition

Helper's SES	Requester's occupational status		
	High	Low	Control (unspecified)
High	30	18	30
Low	26	18	27

Note. There were 40 subjects per cell.

<sup>1</sup>No records were kept of the number of subjects who hung up immediately upon hearing that the caller had reached a wrong number. This was largely because few subjects did so; confederates estimated that perhaps 5 to 10% hung up that quickly.

shown in Table 1, low-status requesters received help less often than either high-status or control requesters, regardless of helper SES.

### Discussion

As in previous studies (Bickman, 1971; Pandey, 1979; Solomon & Herman, 1977), high-status requesters received help more often than did low-status requesters. Although Yinon and his colleagues (1981) suggested that occupational status may not have the same effect as other forms of status, the present results do not support that interpretation.

Although there may be alternative explanations for the results, one possibility is that the status effect resulted from the attributions that the potential helpers made for different requesters. These attributions would affect the perceived legitimacy of requests for help. Several studies have suggested that people help less when they believe that those in need have caused their own problems (Meyer & Mulherin, 1980; Weiner, 1980).

There is ample evidence for the suggestion that high-status actors would receive more generous or favorable attributions for their actions than would low-status actors. Members of high-status groups are assigned less blame for negative events and more credit for positive ones. Thibaut and Riecken (1955) demonstrated that actor status affected the observer's attributions about compliance with requests. In that study, subjects assumed that high-status actors had complied based on the actors' own good judgment, but they saw low-status actors as having been coerced by other people to comply.

Using an Indian sample, Taylor and Jaggi (1974) also found more charitable perceptions for high-status than for low-status targets. Subjects were asked to make attributions for socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behaviors performed by members of desirable or undesirable cultural groups. Observers made more favorable attributions for members of desirable groups; that is, unacceptable behaviors were attributed to external causes, and acceptable conduct was attributed to internal factors. This pattern was reversed for members of undesirable groups, who were blamed for dubious conduct and denied credit for socially acceptable behavior.

Although attributions were not directly assessed in the present study, the results of previous studies have been consistent with an attributional explanation for the effect of requester status on helping. With limited information, schemas about status may have led the subjects to make more "blaming" attributions for the gas station attendant than for the lawyer. Perhaps the gas station attendant's tardiness and resulting need for help were attributed to internal causes, whereas the lawyer's problems were attributed to external factors beyond his or her control, thus resulting in more help for the lawyer and less for the gas station attendant. In the Yinon et al. (1981) study, the exper-

imenter constrained attributions by offering a standard excuse, car trouble, to subjects in all conditions. In contrast, subjects in the present study were free to make their own attributions for the requester's predicament.

Status appears to affect attributions in much the same way that ingroup membership does. Pettigrew (1979) described a group-level, self-serving bias that he termed the *ultimate attribution error*: Ingroup members are assigned external attributions for failures and internal attributions for successes, whereas outgroup members are subjected to the opposite pattern of attributions. Given the median income levels of both neighborhoods in the present study, it is unlikely that lawyers were seen by subjects as ingroup members; nevertheless, lawyers may have received similarly generous attributions. Certainly subjects' behavior was consistent with the possibility that they judged lawyers to be more deserving of help, although other interpretations are possible.

Social scientists have long known that deviant behavior is less likely to be negatively sanctioned when it is performed by high-status actors. For instance, Doob and Gross (1968) found that when drivers blocked traffic at an intersection, other drivers were less likely to honk at high-status than at low-status cars. This status effect also occurs in situations of considerably more import than intersection blocking. Chambliss (1973) studied two groups of delinquent boys, one with a higher SES than the other. In terms of the sheer number of illegal acts, the high-SES boys were more delinquent. However, they were perceived as "sowing their wild oats" and were rarely disciplined, whereas the low-SES boys were seen as criminals and were frequently in trouble with school officials and with the police. Similarly, Reiman (1990) offered evidence that low-class defendants are treated much more harshly by the U.S. criminal justice system than are middle-class defendants. The preferential treatment accorded high-status deviates may be the result of observers' magnanimous attributions for their behavior—attributions guided by schemas about social status.

In the present study, the near-identical frequency of help in the high-status and control conditions suggests that the status effect consists of reduced help to low-status requesters rather than increased help to high-status requesters. However, the direction of this effect could be clarified by using a control condition in which subjects are asked to call the requester's workplace, with occupation unspecified, rather than asking subjects to call the requester's home.

Although the manipulation of helper SES was probably not completely successful, the present study offers no evidence that helper SES, as defined by neighborhood median income, affects helping. As in Bickman's (1971) study, it is likely that helper status has no effect when it is disentangled from actual ability to help. The present findings cannot be explained in terms of similarity between status of helper and status of requester, particularly since

even the high-SES helpers were probably dissimilar to lawyers in terms of income.

In conjunction with earlier studies (e.g., Taylor & Jaggi, 1974; Thibaut & Riecken, 1955), our results suggest that members of high-status groups may have received a substantial "benefit of the doubt." Possibly, the occupational status of requesters activated schemas that affected observer attributions and, consequently, their decisions about whether to help. It seems that social status—whether operationalized in terms of SES, cultural group, type of automobile driven, or occupation—has very powerful implications for observers' behavior. Social status is one of the more obvious details available to us about others. Status is readily inferred through attire, material possessions, style of speech, occupation, and other markers that are immediately evident or quickly discovered. Apparently, low social status leads to unfavorable interpersonal perceptions. These perceptions may in turn result in adverse treatment of low-status individuals.

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