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ARTICLE

The role of legitimizing the social hierarchy in the impact of status on perceived assertiveness and competence

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Abstract

The present research aimed to examine how perceivers' system-justifying beliefs moderate the way they evaluate high- versus low-status targets on assertiveness and competence. In three experimental studies, we manipulated a target's hierarchical position within his company's organization. Participants rated the target on traits reflecting assertiveness and competence. Their system-justifying beliefs were assessed in an ostensibly unrelated study. Results consistently showed that participants inferred assertiveness from the target's hierarchical position regardless of system justification, whereas the relationship between social status and competence was consistently moderated by system-justifying beliefs: only participants high in system justification ascribed more competence to the high-status target than to the low-status target. These findings are in line with the hypothesis suggesting that inferring competence from high-status positions could rely on the tendency to justify social inequalities, whereas inferring assertiveness would not.

KEYWORDS

assertiveness, competence, social judgement, social status, system justification

INTRODUCTION

There is broad consensus in the literature that social interactions are regulated by two fundamental dimensions referring to social relatedness and the desire for affiliation on the one hand, and goal achievement and the desire to promote one's interests on the other. In order to integrate the various labels used

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in the literature, example communion versus agency (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014), or warmth versus competence (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2002), Abele et al. (2021) recently suggested to name these dimensions “horizontal” dimension (“getting along” with others vs. “vertical” dimension; “getting ahead” on the social ladder). The literature on social perception consistently showed that people tend to infer qualities referring to the vertical dimension from a social target's position within the social hierarchy. This strong relationship between social status and the vertical dimension of social judgement is generally explained by just-world thinking or system-justifying beliefs (Fiske et al., 2002; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Ascribing qualities such as competence, efficiency, and ambition to high-status individuals or groups supports the idea that they are deserving of their position and that the existing social rankings are, thus, fair and legitimate. This rationale recently received some empirical support, showing that the relationship between social status and the vertical dimension of social judgement was moderated by ideological beliefs towards inequality (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007) and system-justifying beliefs (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021). However, this work did not distinguish between the recently highlighted facets of the superordinate vertical dimension, namely competence (or ability) on the one hand and assertiveness on the other hand (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). The purpose of the present work was to fill this gap by investigating how perceivers' system-justifying beliefs moderate the way they evaluate high- versus low-status targets on competence on the one hand, and assertiveness on the other.

Stereotypical beliefs about high- versus low-status groups

According to the stereotype content model (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2002), stereotype content primarily results from the social structural relations between groups. Specifically, social status is used to predict competence: Groups are perceived as more competent to the extent that they are perceived as occupying high-status positions within the social hierarchy. This hypothesized relationship between social status and competence received considerable empirical support in both correlational and experimental research. In their initial work, Fiske et al. (2002) showed that perceived status of a wide range of social groups, assessed by economic success, education level, and job prestige, was very highly correlated with competence ratings: High-status groups were consistently seen as more competent, confident, independent, competitive, intelligent, capable, efficient, and skillful than low-status groups. This strong relationship between social status and competence was also corroborated by experimental studies. Using various status manipulations such as material wealth (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007), occupational prestige (Brambilla et al., 2010; Fragale et al., 2011; Gaubert & Louvet, 2021; Louvet et al., 2019), or priority access to valued resources (Conway et al., 1996; Nier et al., 2013), it has been consistently shown that high-status targets were perceived as more competent/agentive than low-status targets. The relationship between social status and competence/agency is so robust that Abele et al. (2021) recently suggested calling this dimension the “vertical” dimension because it directly derives from the rank order of individuals or groups on the social ladder.

Despite the heuristic value of the two fundamental dimensions of social judgement, it was recently suggested that dividing these superordinate dimensions into subordinate facets could be beneficial for some research questions (Abele et al., 2016, 2021). In this perspective, recent work suggested that differentiating assertiveness and competence (or ability) within the vertical dimension could provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between this dimension and social status (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). Assertiveness refers to the motivation to promote one's interests and can be operationalized by traits such as being ambitious, assertive, and self-confident. Competence refers to the efficiency in achieving one's goals and can be operationalized by traits such as being capable, competent, and efficient. Whereas both assertiveness and competence are generally associated with social status, previous work consistently showed that assertiveness relates to social status more systematically

than to competence. For example, it has been shown that targets with a higher income, occupying prestigious jobs, or high-status positions within an organization were systematically rated higher on assertiveness but not necessarily on competence than targets with a low level of income or occupying low-status positions (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Dubois & Beauvois, 2012; Louvet et al., 2019). Similarly, Mollaret and Miraucourt (2016) showed that traits reflecting assertiveness (e.g., ambitious) predicted perceived career success, whereas this was not the case for traits reflecting competence (e.g., skillful). One possible explanation for these discrepancies could be that assertiveness, comprising traits such as dominance and decision-making, translates a target's social position more directly, whereas competence is required at all levels of the social hierarchy, especially in a work context. In other words, whereas high-status positions within an organization specifically require leadership qualities, all positions require competence (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Yzerbyt et al., 2022). Thus, attributing assertiveness to high-status individuals may merely reflect a kind of correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), that is, the tendency to believe that people's behaviour – in our case inferred by a target's position within the organizational hierarchy, reflects their inner dispositions – in our case assertiveness. This hypothesis is supported by research indicating that participants who tended to exhibit a stronger correspondence bias were more likely to attribute “agentic” qualities (assertive, dominant, forceful, leadership qualities) – in other words, assertiveness – to members of high-status groups than to members of low-status groups (Nier et al., 2013).

System-justifying beliefs and high- versus low-status stereotypes

Although it has been well established in the literature that status differences between individuals (Russell & Fiske, 2008) and groups (Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002) are associated with differences in judgements on the vertical dimension, the psychological processes underlying these stereotypical beliefs have clearly been less explored. Variables that have been often considered to play a major role in stereotypical beliefs about high- and low-status groups are system-justifying beliefs or just-world thinking (Fiske et al., 2002; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). In line with this rationale, ascribing more qualities on the vertical dimension (e.g. high skills, ambition) to high-status people than to low-status people suggests that the world is a relatively fair place, in which people generally achieve the status they deserve. There is some evidence in the literature supporting this hypothesis. Initially, Oldmeadow and Fiske (2007) showed that the relationship between perceived status (socio-economic success) and perceived competence was stronger among participants high on system-justifying ideologies such as the belief in a just world or social dominance orientation. These first results recently received further empirical support (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021): This research revealed that in a work context, only participants high on economic system justification rated high-status individuals (high income level, high position within their company) as more competent than low-status individuals. These studies focused on the vertical dimension of social judgement without distinguishing between assertiveness and competence. However, the role of system-justifying beliefs could depend on the specific facet considered. As previously mentioned, it may be difficult for any perceiver to question a high-status target's assertiveness because assertiveness directly translates a target's social position. In contrast, competence is less constrained, and may thus be more sensitive to the perceiver's ideological beliefs (Yzerbyt et al., 2022). Moreover, competence certainly constitutes a more suitable means to legitimize the social hierarchy than assertiveness. As suggested by the literature on social rank attainment, they are two fundamental strategies for ascending the social hierarchy (Cheng et al., 2013; De Waal-Andrews et al., 2015). On the one hand, imperious people can grab social status by displaying assertive and dominant behaviour. On the other hand, social status can be granted to talented people who are recognized and respected for their competence and superior expertise (De Waal-Andrews et al., 2015). Only this latter system of rank allocation

is expected to increase the perception that the hierarchy is legitimate and fair (Cheng et al., 2013). In other words, both assertive and competent individuals may occupy high-status positions, but we can assume that only competent individuals are perceived as deserving of these positions (Fiske & Bai, 2020). It is worth noting that the few previous studies that explored the moderating role of system-justifying beliefs on the relationship between social status and the vertical dimension of social judgement (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007) focused on traits referring to competence (competent, capable, efficient, intelligent). In contrast, previous research exploring the moderating role of correspondence bias in producing high-versus low-status stereotypical beliefs (Nier et al., 2013) focused on traits referring to assertiveness (assertive, dominant, forceful, leadership qualities). Interestingly, this research also revealed that system-justifying ideologies such as the belief in a just world or social dominance orientation did not necessarily moderate the relationship between social status and perceived assertiveness (Nier et al., 2013).

Overview of the present research

The first aim of the present research was to further explore the role of system justifying beliefs in the relationship between a target's position within the social hierarchy and the vertical dimension of social judgement. Importantly, we also aimed was to address this question by distinguishing between the two facets of the vertical dimension recently highlighted in the literature, that is competence (or ability) and assertiveness (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Nicolas et al., 2021; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2022). Based on previous research distinguishing different subcomponents within the vertical dimension of social judgement (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016), we hypothesized that social status would strongly predict assertiveness, and, to a lesser extent, competence (H1). Furthermore, we hypothesized that the relationship between a target's hierarchical position and perceived competence would be moderated by participants' system-justifying beliefs (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007): A target in a leadership position would be ascribed more competence than a target in a low position especially by participants high in system justification (H2). However, we did not expect system justification to moderate the effect of social status on assertiveness: A target in a leadership position would systematically be ascribed more assertiveness than a target in a low position, regardless of system justification (H3).

EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 aimed to provide first evidence for the moderating role of system justification on the relationship between a target's position within the hierarchy of his company and perceived competence versus assertiveness.

Method

Participants

We recruited $N = 54$ French adults (44 women, 10 men) via various student Facebook groups. Their age ranged from 18 to 49 years ($M = 21.8$, $SD = 4.71$). A sensitivity analysis with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) showed that we would be able to detect medium-sized effects of at least $f^2 = 0.15$ ($1 - \beta = .80$; $\alpha = .05$) with this sample size when testing whether system justification moderates the effect of social status on competence.

Procedure and materials

Participants were told that the research was about the “perception of the labor market”, and comprised two independent studies. The first study was introduced as measuring “some general beliefs about the labor market” and aimed to assess the moderator *system justification*. Insofar as we manipulated social status within a work context, we assessed system justification using the Economic System Justification Scale (ESJ; Jost & Thompson, 2000). Participants indicated their levels of agreement or disagreement with 17 statements about the economic system (e.g., *If people work hard, they almost always get what they want*; *Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system, they have only themselves to blame*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) on 7-point Likert scales (1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*). The second study was presented as exploring impression formation.

In line with the widely accepted definition of social status as referring to individuals' relative position within the social hierarchy, we operationalized this rank order by manipulating an employee's position in the organization chart of his company (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021). Participants read a short description of an employee and his company comprising some trivial information. Specifically, participants read the same description in both conditions: “Robin is 38, married, and has two children. He started his professional career, in the Paris region, in the automotive industry. He has now been living in Alsace for 12 years and working in the same company specialized in the food industry processing. Robin generally appreciates his work, even if he sometimes encounters difficulties. He gets along pretty well with most of his colleagues, despite some inevitable conflicts.” This description was accompanied by an organizational chart manipulating the hierarchical position of this employee as either a leadership position (i.e., high-status condition) or a subordinate position (i.e., low-status condition; see Figure 1). Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two experimental conditions.

To ensure that the status manipulation was successful, participants rated the perceived status of the target on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 *very low* to 7 *very high* with the following seven items: *economic resources, educational level, job prestige, responsibilities at work, social status, power, and respect*. Then participants rated the target on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 *not at all* to 7 *completely* on 12 traits, three of them assessing assertiveness (*ambitious, competitive, self-confident*), and three assessing competence (*capable, competent, efficient*). Even though the horizontal dimension was not a primary interest of the present research, to fully capture social judgement, the 6 items measuring assertiveness and competence were randomly mixed with 6 traits referring to sociability (*likeable, nice, warm*) and morality (*honest, sincere, trustworthy*). The traits were selected from previous research (Abele et al., 2016; Cambon, 2022; Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014). Finally, participants indicated their demographics concerning gender, age, and occupation.

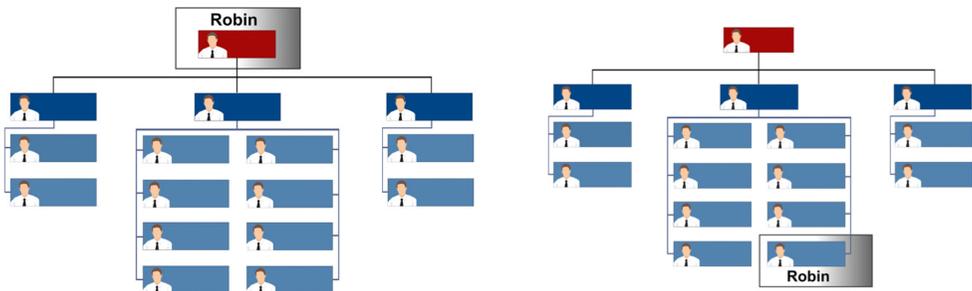


FIGURE 1 Organizational charts used in the high-status (on the left) and low-status (on the right) condition.

Results

Manipulation check

To check for the success of our status manipulation, we created an index of perceived status by averaging the seven status items ($\alpha = .88$), and included this index as the outcome in a between participants ANOVA. Results revealed that the high-status target was rated significantly higher in social status ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.83$) than the low-status target ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.37$), confirming that the status manipulation was successful, $F(1, 52) = 15.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$.

Effect of social status on perceived assertiveness and competence

Before testing our hypotheses, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the 6 personality traits hypothesizing a bifactor model to ensure that assertiveness and competence are distinct factors. To evaluate model fit, we reported the ML chi-square statistic (a non-significant value indicates a well-fitting model). However, because this statistic is sensitive to model complexity as sample size, we also reported common fit indices recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999): the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis fit Index (TLI), along with the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Results indicated that the hypothesized bifactor model provided excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(df) = 4.25(8)$, $p = .834$. All fit indices meet the recommended criteria (CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.05; RMSEA < .01; SRMR = .03). Thus, for further analyses, we formed a single index of perceived assertiveness on the one hand and perceived competence on the other hand by averaging the three assertiveness items ($\alpha = .85$) and the three competence items ($\alpha = .85$).

In order to test whether social status predicts predominantly assertiveness and to a lesser extent competence (H1), we performed a mixed-ANOVA with social status as a between-participants factor (high vs. low), and the subcomponents of the vertical dimension of social judgement as a within-participants factor (assertiveness vs. competence). First, results revealed a significant main effect of the subcomponent, $F(1, 52) = 21.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$, suggesting that participants provided higher ratings on competence ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.95$) than assertiveness ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.16$). They also revealed a significant main effect of manipulated status, $F(1, 52) = 15.0$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$, indicating that the high-status target ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.71$) was rated higher than the low-status target ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.86$). More interestingly, this main effect of status was qualified by the expected subcomponent by status interaction, $F(1, 52) = 18.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed there was no difference in assertiveness ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 0.85$) and competence ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 0.90$) ascribed to the high-status target, $|t| < 1$. However the low-status target received significant lower ratings regarding assertiveness ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.98$) than regarding competence ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(52) = -6.34$, $p < .001$. Moreover, pairwise comparisons between the high- and the low-status target for each dimension separately revealed that participants attributed more assertiveness to the high-status target than to the low-status target, $t(88) = 5.57$, $p < .001$, whereas there was no significant difference for competence, $|t| < 1$.

Moderating effects of economic system justification (ESJ)

We relied on multiple regression analyses to test for the moderating effect of ESJ on the relationship between social status and perceived competence on the one hand (H2) and social status and perceived assertiveness (H3) on the other hand. We introduced social status (coded: +1 high status, -1 low status), ESJ (mean score centered), and their product as predictors and perceived competence or perceived assertiveness as the criterion.

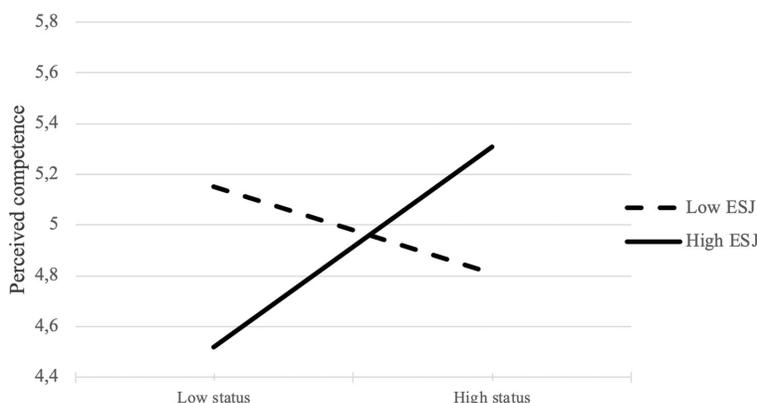


FIGURE 2 Effect of social status on perceived competence for participants high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) in economic system justification (Study 1).

Competence

There was no main effect of social status or ESJ, both $|t|s < 1$. However, as expected, the Status \times ESJ interaction was significant, $\beta = .30$, $t(50) = 2.16$, $p = .036$. Simple slopes at one standard deviation above (high ESJ) and below the mean (low ESJ) showed that social status significantly predicted perceived competence for participants high in ESJ, $\beta = .12$, $t(50) = 2.18$, $p = .034$. In contrast, this was not the case for participants low in ESJ, $|t| < 1$. Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 2, system justification moderated the effect of social status on perceived competence: Only participants high in system justification ascribed more competence to the high-status target than to the low-status target (see Figure 2).

Assertiveness

In line with Hypothesis 3, the Status \times ESJ interaction was not significant, $|t| < 1$, indicating that ESJ did not moderate the effect of social status on assertiveness. Only social status positively predicted assertiveness, $\beta = .57$, $t(50) = 5.25$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

In line with our hypotheses and previous research (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016), social status revealed to be more strongly related to assertiveness than to competence: Whereas the high-status target was judged more assertive than the low-status target, the relationship between social status and competence was not even significant. Interestingly, the patterns of results suggest that both targets are seen as competent and that the difference in attributed assertiveness between the high- and the low-status target primarily results from a perceived lack of assertiveness on the part of the low-status target. More importantly, economic system justification significantly moderated the effect of social status on perceived competence, whereas this was not the case for perceived assertiveness. Whereas participants rated the high-status target more assertive than the low-status target regardless of system justification, only participants high in system justification rated the high-status target also more competent than the low-status target. In sum, this study offered encouraging initial support for our hypotheses. However, considering the small sample size, further empirical evidence is needed to consolidate our findings.

EXPERIMENT 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to replicate the findings from Experiment 1 using a larger sample size. We also aimed to replicate our previous results with a German (instead of a French) sample to account for potential cultural differences, especially since system justification is much weaker in France than in Germany (Bénabou, 2008; Vesper et al., 2022). We pre-registered this study at the Open Science Framework (anonymized for peer review: https://osf.io/rvf6p/?view_only=8d4db174d9dc41b0beb0dda8d22d0aeb).

Method

Participants

Based on the suggestion to recruit 2.5 times more participants for replication studies (see Simonsohn, 2015), we recruited the pre-registered $N = 135$ participants (99 women, 36 men) via social media (predominantly student Facebook groups) and student-email lists at German universities. Their age ranged from 18 to 69 years ($M = 25.43$, $SD = 6.78$). A sensitivity analysis showed that this sample size could detect medium-sized effects of at least $f^2 = 0.098$ ($1 - \beta = .95$; $\alpha = .05$), when testing whether the Status \times ESJ interaction explains significant variance of competence.

Procedure and materials

We mostly followed a similar procedure as in Study 1, again using the cover story of two unrelated online studies and measuring the moderator system justification with the ESJ scale ($\alpha = .84$) first. Then, we presented the description of the employee with the organization chart indicating his status position. Afterwards, we used the same 7 items as in Experiment 1 to assess the targets' perceived status (i.e., manipulation check). We then presented the traits of the vertical dimension randomly mixed with the traits of the horizontal dimension. To be sure about the robustness of results obtained in Experiment 1, we used a more comprehensive measure of assertiveness and competence. The items of Experiment 1 were supplemented by adding three items assessing the target's competence (*intelligent*, *skillful*, *effective*) and three items assessing assertiveness (*assertive*, *dominant*, *determined*). Again, these supplementary traits were selected from previous research (Abele et al., 2016; Cambon, 2022; Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014). Finally, the participants indicated their gender and age before they were debriefed. Psychology students could enter their contact data to receive course credit as compensation.

Results

Manipulation check

The same between-participants ANOVA as in Study 1 on the mean score of perceived status ($\alpha = .92$) showed that the status manipulation was successful, $F(1, 133) = 195$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .59$. The target's perceived status was significantly higher in the high-status condition ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 0.73$) than in the low-status condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.95$).

¹We further added four items to assess perceived *effort* as an additional subcomponent of the vertical dimension to our design (Cambon, 2022; Louvet et al., 2019). However, an exploratory factor analysis did not support this additional factor among our sample: The items intended to measure *effort* mostly loaded on competence. We therefore did not consider these items in our analyses.

Effect of social status on perceived assertiveness and competence

As in Study 1, a CFA on the 12 personality traits ensured that assertiveness and competence are distinct factors. Although the chi-square statistic revealed this time to be significant, $\chi^2(df) = 167(53)$, $p < .001$, the hypothesized bifactor model presented an overall good fit to the data (CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .06). For further analyses, we again performed a single index of perceived assertiveness on the one hand ($\alpha = .93$) and perceived competence on the other hand ($\alpha = .92$), by averaging each of the six respective items.

To test Hypothesis 1 that social status predominantly predicts assertiveness, and, to a lesser extent, competence, we performed the same mixed-ANOVA as in Study 1. The results replicated our findings from Study 1. A significant main effect of the subcomponent, $F(1, 133) = 72.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .35$, again showed that, averaged across both status-conditions, participants provided lower ratings regarding assertiveness ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.20$) than regarding competence ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 0.93$). Furthermore, a significant main effect of social status, $F(1, 133) = 45.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, indicated that the high-status target ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.79$) was rated higher than the low-status target ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.91$).

More central to our first hypothesis, the subcomponent by status interaction was also significant, $F(1, 133) = 94.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed there was no difference in assertiveness ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.81$) and competence ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.88$) ascribed to the high-status target, $|t| < 1$. However the low-status target received significant lower ratings regarding assertiveness ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.03$) than regarding competence ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(133) = 12.68$, $p < .001$. Although the high-status target was not only rated significantly more assertive than the low-status target (as in Study 1) but also significantly more competent, the difference between the high- and low-status target was as expected larger regarding assertiveness, $t(133) = 9.83$, $p < .001$, and smaller regarding competence, $t(133) = 2.79$, $p = .035$. This, again, is in line with Hypothesis 1 that social status predominantly predicts a difference in ascribed assertiveness, and to a lesser extent, competence.

Moderating effects of economic system justification (ESJ)

To test whether ESJ moderates the effect of social status on perceived competence (H2) but not on assertiveness (H3), we performed the same multiple regression analysis described in Study 1, separately on competence and assertiveness as the respective dependent measure.

Competence

There was no main effect of ESJ, $|t| \leq 1.61$, but a significant main effect of social status on perceived competence, $\beta = .23$, $t(131) = 2.73$, $p = .007$. More central, there was a one-sided significant Status \times ESJ interaction, $\beta = .15$, $t(131) = 1.83$, $p = .070$. Simple slopes at one standard deviation above (high ESJ) and below the mean (low ESJ) showed that social status significantly predicted perceived competence for participants high in ESJ, $\beta = .38$, $t(131) = 3.21$, $p = .002$. In contrast, this was not the case for participants low in ESJ, $|t| < 1$. Thus, replicating the results obtained in Study 1 and consistent with Hypothesis 2, system justification moderated the predicted effect of social status on perceived competence with the preregistered interaction pattern: Only participants high in system justification ascribed more competence to the high-status target than to the low-status target (see [Figure 3](#)).

Assertiveness

In line with Hypothesis 3, the Status \times ESJ interaction was again not significant, $|t| < 1$, indicating that ESJ did not moderate the effect of social status on assertiveness. As in Study 1, only social status positively predicted assertiveness, $\beta = .64$, $t(131) = 9.59$, $p < .001$.

²Note that RMSEA is higher than Hu and Bentler's recommendations. However, insofar as all other fit indices meet the recommended criteria, we considered our model acceptable.

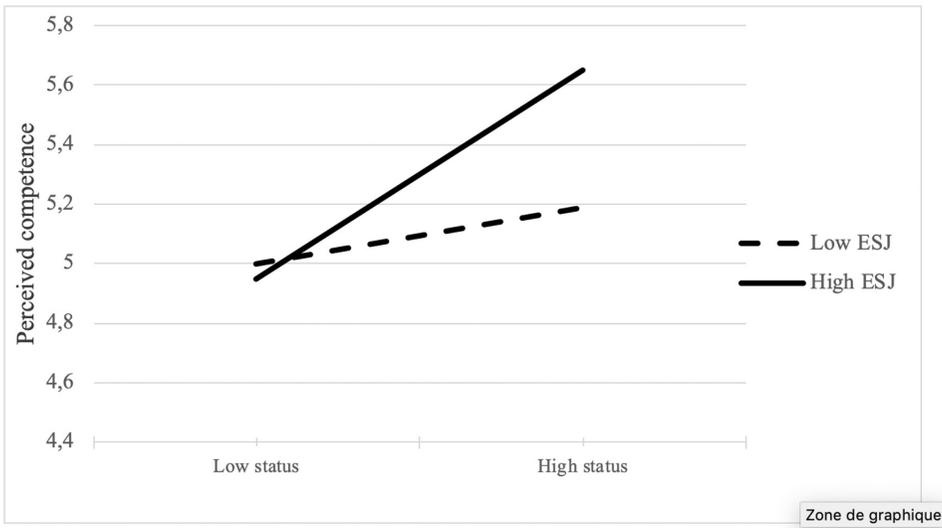


FIGURE 3 Effect of social status on perceived competence for participants high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) in economic system justification (Study 2).

Discussion

In Study 2, we replicated the findings of Study 1 with a bigger sample and in another cultural context. First, social status was more related to assertiveness than to competence. However, in Study 2 the high-status target was not only judged much more assertive than the low-status target, but, to a lesser extent, also more competent, whereas in Study 1 the difference was only significant for assertiveness. More central to our main purpose, we replicated our finding from Study 1 that economic system justification moderated the effect of social status on perceived competence, but not on perceived assertiveness. Whereas participants inferred assertiveness from a leadership position regardless of system justification, only participants high in economic system justification also ascribed more competence to the high-status than the low-status target.

EXPERIMENT 3

The purpose of Experiment 3 was to further test our hypotheses introducing social status as a within-participant factor. We also aimed to replicate our previous findings with a broader sample. In our previous studies, participants were predominantly university students and female. In Experiment 3, we targeted a more gender-balanced sample of people by sending study invitations to a wide range of groups on social networks, including not only student groups but also various occupational and leisure groups.

Method

Participants

We recruited 197 French adults (105 women, 91 men, 1 not specified) aged 18–72 years ($M = 35.91$, $SD = 13.68$) via a wide range of groups on social media. Among these $N = 197$ participants, 58 were university students, 139 were working in a wide range of professional areas. A sensitivity analysis showed

that we would be able to detect small to medium-sized effects of at least $f^2 = 0.07$ ($1 - \beta = .95$; $\alpha = .05$) with this sample size when testing whether system justification moderates the effect of social status on competence.

Procedure and materials

The procedure and materials were nearly the same as those used in Experiment 1 and 2. Again, we first measured *system justification* with the ESJ scale in an ostensibly unrelated study. We averaged all items into a single ESJ score ($\alpha = .81$). Using within-participants experimental design, each participant had then to rate both the high- and the low-status target in random order. To ensure that the status manipulation was successful, we used the same 7 items as in Experiment 1 and 2, which we averaged to form a single measure. We measured the same six traits to assess competence and assertiveness as in Experiment 2. The six assertiveness and the six competence items were again presented in random order and mixed with the six communal traits.

Results

Manipulation check

To check whether our status manipulation was successful, we again introduced the perceived status of the target ($\alpha = .91$) in a within-participants ANOVA. Results revealed that the high-status target was rated significantly higher in social status ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 0.91$) than the low-status target ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.01$), showing that our status manipulation was also successful in a repeated-measurement design, $F(1, 196) = 505.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .72$.

Effect of social status on perceived assertiveness and competence

As in Studies 1 and 2, a CFA on the 12 personality traits ensured that assertiveness and competence are distinct factors. Although the chi-square statistic revealed again to be significant, $\chi^2(df) = 210(53)$, $p < .001$, the hypothesized bifactor model presented an overall good fit to the data (CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = .09; SRMR = .06) (see footnote 2). For further analyses, we again created average composite scores for assertiveness ($\alpha = .88$) and competence ($\alpha = .91$).

To test our hypothesis suggesting that social status predominantly predicts assertiveness, and, to a lesser extent, competence (H1), we performed ANOVA introducing both social status (high vs. low) and the subcomponents of the vertical dimension of social judgement (assertiveness vs. competence) as within-participants factors. The results closely replicated findings from Experiment 1 and 2. First, a significant main effect of the subcomponent, $F(1, 196) = 72.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$, showed that ratings on assertiveness ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.11$) were significantly lower than ratings on competence ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.00$). Second, a significant main effect of social status, $F(1, 196) = 71.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$, indicated that the high-status target ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 0.94$) was rated higher across both assertiveness and competence than the low-status target ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.87$). More importantly for our first hypothesis, this main effect of status was again qualified by the expected subcomponent by status interaction, $F(1, 196) = 88.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed there was no difference in assertiveness ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.03$) and competence ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.03$) ascribed to the high-status target, $t(374) = 2.01$, $p = .270$. However the low-status target received significant lower ratings on assertiveness ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.95$) than on competence ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(374) = -12.65$, $p < .001$. Moreover, pairwise comparisons between the high- and the low-status target for each dimension separately revealed that participants attributed more assertiveness to the high-status target than to the

low-status target, $t(343) = 12.23, p < .001$, whereas there was no significant difference for competence, $t(343) = 1.77, p = .469$.

Moderating effects of economic system justification (ESJ)

To test whether ESJ moderates the effect of social status on perceived competence (H2) but not on perceived assertiveness (H3), we first computed a difference score between the high- and the low-status target separately for assertiveness and competence ratings. The more positive the score, the more participants rated the high-status target more positively than the low-status target. We then performed two simple regression analyses introducing ESJ (mean score) as the predictor and the difference score for assertiveness and competence as the criterion respectively. Results showed that ESJ significantly predicted the difference score for competence, $\beta = .23, t(195) = 3.23, p = .001$, whereas there was no effect of ESJ on the difference score for assertiveness, $|t| < 1$. Thus, as expected, ESJ only moderated the effect of social status on ascribed competence: The higher participants' ESJ score, the more the high-status target was ascribed competence compared to the low-status target.

Discussion

This third experiment nicely replicated findings of Experiment 1 and 2 with manipulating social status within participants and broader sample concerning occupation, gender, and age. Again, social status was systematically related to perceived assertiveness, whereas the impact of social status on perceived competence was dependent on system justification. The higher participants scored on economic system justification, the more they differentiated the high-status target from the low-status target on competence. These results provide further support to the hypothesis suggesting that stereotypical beliefs concerning the relationship between social status and perceived competence might rely on system-justifying beliefs.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A substantial body of research on social judgement consistently highlighted a strong relationship between social status and the vertical dimension of social judgement, including qualities such as competence, intelligence, ambition, or assertiveness (Fiske et al., 2002; Fragale et al., 2011; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007, 2010). This strong relationship has generally been explained by just-world thinking or system-justifying beliefs (Fiske et al., 2002; Jost & Banaji, 1994). This rationale already received some empirical support (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). However, this work specifically focused on one facet of the vertical dimension, namely competence (or ability). The aim of the present research was to take a more nuanced look at the impact of social status on the vertical dimension of social judgement by introducing the two facets highlighted in the literature, namely competence (or ability) versus assertiveness (Abele et al., 2016, 2021), and test whether system-justifying beliefs moderate these relationships differently. We hypothesized that social status would strongly predict assertiveness, regardless of system justification, whereas only individuals high in system justification would ascribe more competence to a high-status target than to a low-status target. In order to test these hypotheses, we conducted three experiments manipulating a male target's position (high vs. low) within the organization chart of his company. Participants rated the target on traits reflecting assertiveness and competence. Their system-justifying beliefs were assessed beforehand in an ostensibly unrelated study. These studies were conducted among student and non-student samples, in France and in Germany, using a between or within-participant design for experimentally varying social status. Results revealed a very consistent pattern across the three studies.

First of all, replicating previous research (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miracourt, 2016), social status was more strongly related to assertiveness than to competence. Whereas participants consistently judged the high-status target more assertive than the low-status target, the difference between the two targets was smaller (Study 2) or even not significant (Studies 1 and 3) regarding competence. More precisely, both targets are seen as highly competent and the difference in attributed assertiveness between the high- and the low-status target primarily results from a perceived lack of assertiveness concerning the low-status target. These results are in line with a kind of correspondence bias: People tend to straightforwardly infer (a lack of) assertiveness from high (vs. low) positions within the social hierarchy, insofar as high-status positions specifically require leadership qualities (e.g. dominance, decision-making, self-confidence). In contrast, this would not be the case for competence insofar as all positions within the social hierarchy require competence (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, & Rohmer, 2014; Carrier, Louvet, & Rohmer, 2014; Yzerbyt et al., 2022). This is undoubtedly particularly true within an organizational context: people are expected to contribute with efficiency to their organization whatever their occupation and their hierarchical position within this organization.

Interestingly, the relationship between social status and perceived competence was significant for the German sample (Study 2), whereas this was not the case for the two studies conducted among French participants (Studies 1 and 3). This result could be explained by cultural specificities concerning system justification in France in line with the egalitarian model that emerged in France from the French Revolution (Langer et al., 2020). French society is built on values of liberty, equality, and solidarity. Consequently, French people may be particularly reluctant to justify social inequalities by ascribing more competence to high-status individuals. Future research should examine such cultural influences in a more systematic way.

Furthermore, the present work provided empirical support to the hypothesis suggesting that the relationship between social status and the vertical dimension of social judgement could rely on the tendency to legitimize social inequalities (Fiske et al., 2002; Jost & Banaji, 1994). As far as we know this assumption often stated in theory only received little empirical support until now (Gaubert & Louvet, 2021; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). Going beyond this previous research that did not distinguish between the two facets of the vertical dimension (i.e., assertiveness and competence), the present research showed that only competence but not assertiveness could fulfil this role. As expected, our results consistently showed that participants inferred assertiveness from a male target's social status regardless of system justification, whereas the relationship between social status and perceived competence was consistently moderated by system-justifying beliefs: Only participants high in system justification ascribed more competence to the high-status target than to the low-status target. These results suggest that assertiveness is used to directly translate a male target's social position, whereas competence is used to legitimate the social hierarchy. As suggested by the literature on social status attainment (Cheng et al., 2013; De Waal-Andrews et al., 2015), competence may be a particularly appropriate way to legitimize social inequalities because competent people are recognized and respected for their skills and knowledge, and consequently perceived as deserving of their position. Moreover, competence may be seen as based on effort (remember that competence and effort appeared to be inextricably linked in Study 2), and consequently under people's personal control. Thus, people may be seen to deserve their position insofar as they can be held responsible for it (Kay et al., 2005).

Although the present research provides greater insight into how social judgements are used to justify the existing social hierarchy, it is not without some limitations. First, we conducted our research within a work context manipulating an individual target's social status by his hierarchical position within his company. The observed result patterns could be somewhat specific to this context, which may limit the generalizability of our findings to a broader societal level. For example, the relatively weak link between status and competence could be explained by the fact that all workers are expected to do their job well whatever this job is. However, our results are corroborated by very recent findings addressing a similar issue in the domain of group perception in our society (Yzerbyt et al., 2022). This research aimed to examine how people evaluate high- versus low-status groups' assertiveness and competence as a function

of their own relative status. Assuming that people who enjoy high status would be inclined to legitimate the social hierarchy because of self-serving motivations, the authors used legitimacy beliefs as a proxy for social status. Results indicated that people high in system-justifying beliefs differentiated high-status groups from low-status groups in a similar way on assertiveness and competence, whereas people low in system-justifying beliefs saw less of a difference in competence between the two groups than regarding assertiveness.

Second, in our studies, the target person was always a 38-year-old man. It would be interesting to establish in future research whether the results would be the same if the target had varying social identities, especially if the target was a woman instead of a man. This may be particularly relevant as people's social judgements are highly gendered. According to common gender stereotypes, women are rated lower on the vertical dimension of social judgement than men, especially concerning assertiveness (Eagly et al., 2020; Hentschel et al., 2019).

Third, by manipulating the target's social status through his hierarchical position within his company, we introduced a formal hierarchy mainly based on power. In a power hierarchy, individuals are rank-ordered based on the number of resources they control, and these resources are often tangible (e.g. a promotion). However, social hierarchy can also be based on prestige referring to the extent individuals are respected and admired by others (Fiske et al., 2016; Fragale et al., 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Even though power and prestige are generally strongly correlated (Fiske et al., 2016), this is not necessarily true in all instances. For example, an emeritus professor or an author may enjoy a high level of prestige but a low level of power (Fragale et al., 2011). Some previous research suggested that the consequences on social judgement may not be the same (De Waal-Andrews et al., 2015; Fragale et al., 2011; Gaubert & Louvet, 2021).

Finally, in our work, we did not consider the perceivers' social status. According to the system justification account, system justification is a general psychological mechanism and should occur regardless of social status (Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). However, recent empirical work consistently reported that high-status people were more likely to legitimate the social system than low-status people (Brandt et al., 2020; Caricati, 2017). In the same vein, the positive relationship between social status and perceived competence has been shown to be stronger among members of high-status groups, suggesting that this stereotype not only serves to justify and maintain the social hierarchy but also serves to reclaim positive social identity (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2010; Yzerbyt et al., 2022). It could therefore be interesting for future research to introduce the perceiver's own position within the social hierarchy as an additional variable.

CONCLUSION

Our research clearly supports the relevance of distinguishing assertiveness from competence within the vertical dimension of social judgement recently highlighted in the literature (Abele et al., 2016, 2021; Louvet et al., 2019; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). This research also provides deeper insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between the perception of social status and judgements on the vertical dimension. Whereas assertiveness seems to be inherently and inevitably related to a target's social status, competence seems to be less constrained and instead more sensitive to the perceiver's ideological beliefs. In sum, we could conclude that in people's minds, assertiveness just means status, whereas competence may earn status (Fiske & Bai, 2020) and may therefore be used to justify social rankings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Eva Louvet: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; methodology; formal analysis; supervision; project administration; data curation. **Franziska Ehrke:** Writing – original draft; supervision. **Cécile Gaubert:** Investigation; methodology; conceptualization. **H. Long Tran:** Investigation; formal analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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