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How it feels to be a rank outsider

Refusing to be ranked on the social ladder does not take away from the sad truth - one's perceived status in society lies at the heart of well being

Ladders are a potent symbol of the structure of our societies. Our social discourse about status, rank and success is full of ladder images and metaphors. A quick Google search for ladder quotes turns up 'the ladder of success is never crowded at the top', 'climb your own ladder or you dig your own hole', 'you cannot climb the ladder of success dressed in the costume of failure' and 'you can never climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pocket'.

Scholars have long suggested that 'social class is a fundamental means by which individuals are ranked on the social ladder'. Where we stand on that ladder is deemed to influence our cultural values, our political attitudes, our social relationships and, of course, our opportunities in life.

Animal hierarchies and ladders

Indeed, our social rank is so important that we are exceptionally good at judging it, even in vanishingly short encounters. Experiments show that it takes us less than a minute to judge the social class of strangers accurately, even when we only have appearances — videoed records of social exchanges or photographs — on which to judge. Just from hearing seven spoken words we can discern whether the speaker has a university degree or not.

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Our capabilities in judging social rank derive from our evolutionary history. In animal hierarchies, it is critical to know whether an encounter is with a higher-ranking individual who commands deference, a peer with potential for co-operation or a lower-ranking individual who might be dominated.

Animal dominance hierarchies might not seem very relevant to human

health and wellbeing. Yet where we stand on the social ladder and, more importantly, *where we think we rank* turns out to be very significant.

Measuring the perception of social rank

Previously, I wrote about the social gradient in health and how our place on the social ladder — measured, for example, by income — is a strong determinant of our risk of disease and death. But in addition to *objective* measures of social rank — which also include education, wealth, job prestige and neighbourhood affluence or poverty — individuals can be asked where they feel they stand on the ladder, their *subjective* social status.

Two decades ago, the health psychologist Nancy Adler and colleagues came up with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, to measure how individuals perceive their social rank in comparison with others in a group. Participants in such an exercise are shown an image of a ladder and asked to imagine that it represents the social hierarchy of the country they live in, or their community or — for young people — their school. They are then invited to place themselves on one of ten rungs.

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Unsurprisingly, subjective social status is related to health: the higher up the ladder you place yourself, the better (on average) your health. More surprisingly, though, a strong body of research shows that subjective social status can be a better predictor of health and wellbeing than objective measures.

The Macarthur ladder is quick and easy to use in research studies and has indeed been used with populations all over the world. In fact, it is the only widely used and valid measure of subjective social status.

Because it seemed useful and easy to use, and because my research group working in the northern-English city of Bradford is interested in the social determinants of health, we started to use the ladder measure in one of our research studies, in which we are following the health of pregnant women and their babies. We began in 2016 and so far have around 2,000 families in the study.

Rejection of Macarthur's scale

We are just beginning to look at some of the data we have been collecting. But it has come as something of a surprise that 14 per cent of

the women have chosen not to answer the question inviting them to rank themselves relative to their communities and 17 per cent declined to rank themselves relative to England as a whole.

This was in stark contrast to the fewer than 5 per cent of women who chose not to answer the searching question that came just before it in the survey — 'How well would you say you (and your partner) are managing financially these days?' — or the one immediately following, as to whether they felt closely attached to their family. Something specific about the ladder question seems to have elicited the high non-response rate.

Around the same time, our research team began working with children and young people to develop research questions and measures for a new study, following the youth of Bradford through secondary school and out into the adult world. We consulted young people about the questions we thought we might use and the MacArthur ladder was one of the measures we had planned to include.

The young people, consistently and vehemently, did not like the ladder. They told us they would feel uncomfortable ranking themselves, that the question implied that money and status were more important than they felt they should be and that they already felt judged all the time by society — they didn't want to have to think about that any further. The reactions were so strong that we decided, until we can come up with a more acceptable method, not to use the ladder question and hence not to measure subjective social status.

We can't run from the truth

So here we have a conundrum. Subjective social status — where we think we rank in society, how much we feel we are respected or held in esteem by others, how important we think we are — may lie at the heart of health and wellbeing, because the lack of those things is perhaps the most important cause of chronic stress in our societies. Yet we can perhaps no longer measure it.

We could see it as a good thing that people, and young people in particular, are rejecting the idea that social status and rank matter, that they are rejecting the stigma that has traditionally been attached to low social class and low income — or to those who choose not to climb the 'ladder of success', the 'greasy pole' or whatever metaphor we pick for worldly ambition.

But the sad truth of so many of our societies is that the world does rank

and the world does judge. Where you stand on the social ladder really does affect your life-chances and your health and wellbeing. And in some societies — including that in which the young people of Bradford are growing up — the ladder is very steep and the rungs are very far apart.

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