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Title:
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Date:
2024-04

Citation:
Zhang, T. & Overbeck, J. R. (2024). The effects of social (dis)engagement on status conferral: A context dependent account. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 54 (4), pp.195-208. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.13023.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/351409

Received: 15 February 2023 | Revised: 22 December 2023 | Accepted: 18 January 2024

DOI: 10.1111/jasp.13023

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Journal of Applied Social Psychology WILEY

The effects of social (dis)engagement on status conferral: A context dependent account

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Abstract

The functionalist perspective of status suggests that, to attain status, individuals need to be socially engaging and contribute to a group. In contrast, the signaling perspective of status indicates that people often perceive a lack of social engagement as a status cue and thus confer status on someone who is socially disengaging. Integrating these two important perspectives in the status literature, we propose a context dependent account of social (dis)engagement and status conferral in groups and organizations. Whereas social engagement (e.g., contributing to a group and connecting with its members) results in status attainment in task contexts, social disengagement (e.g., withholding benefits from a group and distancing oneself from its members) leads to status attainment in social contexts. A laboratory study and an online experiment provide partial empirical support for our predictions. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In an organization, who will get more resources in lean times? Whose preferences will prevail during disagreements? Who will advance more quickly, be consulted more on important matters, or be safer from cuts and layoffs? Often the answer is: those with higher status. In groups and organizations, members with higher status often enjoy disproportionate resources, privileges, and esteem, whereas those with lower status are regarded more critically and endure disadvantages. Scholars have proposed that these differences reflect a deliberate (if not always conscious) process by which an organization trades resources and privileges for the greater contributions that high-value individuals can provide, and those individuals' desire for status serves as a means to retain them in the organization (Cheng et al., 2013; Frank, 1985; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Because of the investment that groups and organizations tend to make in those individuals identified as high status, and the benefits they expect to gain from them, the question of who obtains status is highly consequential.

Whereas competence is integral to status conferral in groups and organizations (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), it remains unclear whether social engagement (e.g., contributing to a group and connecting with its members) is necessary for status attainment. On the one hand, the functionalist perspective of status suggests that groups and organizations often expect status candidates to socially engage and contribute to the achievement of group and organizational goals (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Overbeck et al., 2005; Willer, 2009). In other words, status candidates who strive for high status in a group or organization are supposed to display social engagement cues that can assure other group and organizational members that they can be relied upon to contribute to the achievement of collective goals. On the other hand, the signaling perspective of status shows that people who have high status in groups and societies tend to be less prosocial than their low-status peers (Guinote et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010, 2012) and that observers often consider a lack of social engagement in a group setting as a sign of high status (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Leary et al., 2014).

Integrating these two important yet distinct perspectives in the status literature, we propose a context dependent account of social (dis)engagement and status conferral in groups and organizations. We argue that the relationship between social (dis)engagement and status conferral depends on the context in which status candidates strive to attain status. Specifically, we distinguish between task contexts in which the focus of a group is on the completion of a specific task, such as working on a group project, and social contexts in which the focus of a group is on the social interaction between the group members, such as having a causal group chat. Whereas social engagement (e.g., contributing to a group and connecting with its members) enhances one's status in task contexts, social disengagement (e.g., withholding benefits from a group and distancing oneself from its members) will increase one's status in social contexts.

2 | THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE OF STATUS

Status is the relative ranking of individuals on a vertical dimension reflecting perceived prominence, respect, influence, and value (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006). It reflects the degree to which someone is known, desirable, and given privileged access to resources (Anderson et al., 2001; Overbeck et al., 2005). The weight of scholarship in social psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior has followed the functionalist tradition (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Lenski, 1966), emphasizing the role of inferences about an individual's competence in status judgments (Berger et al., 1972, 1998), and the resulting value that a group might gain from that individual (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Berger et al., 1972, 1998; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Overbeck et al., 2005; Willer, 2009). These scholars emphasize that groups need to identify individuals who can take leadership roles, organize and direct group activities, and smooth interpersonal relations (Arendt, 1970; Bales, 1950; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Lenski, 1966), and then trade costly resources and privileges for these contributions (Lenski, 1966).

Also implied in the functionalist view of status is that status candidates need to socially engage with their group or organizational members and to contribute to the pursuit of collective goals, which characterize most task contexts. A group or organization that confers high status and the associated benefits upon group members who socially disengage and refuse to share their knowledge, abilities, and expertise risks not being able to achieve its goals and losing important resources that could have been offered to someone who socially engages and contributes to the task completion. From this point of view, it is unsurprising that group or organizational members confer high status upon individuals who demonstrate competence, and socially engage with other members and contribute to the group or organization (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Overbeck et al., 2005; Willer, 2009). Therefore, based on status research from a functionalist perspective, we hypothesize the following.

Hypothesis 1. In task contexts, social engagement cues increase status conferral, whereas social disengagement cues decrease it.

2.1 | The signaling perspective of status

Meanwhile, another stream of research in the status literature has shown that status signals or cues play an important role in the status conferral processes and that one of such signals is social disengagement. To begin with, it has been established that individuals who have or experience high status tend to be less prosocial and ethical than their low-status counterparts (Guinote et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010, 2012). Compared with their lower-class peers, higher-class individuals are less generous and helpful toward others in need, prioritize their own needs and concerns over others' more, and are generally less compassionate to others (Piff et al., 2010). Similarly, Guinote et al. (2015) found that social status modulates prosocial orientation such that individuals who experience higher prestige and reputation in the eyes of others (i.e., higher status) are less communal and prosocial toward others.

The findings regarding the negative relationship between status and prosocial orientation are significant because a lack of prosocial orientation and behaviors can consequently serve as a status signal and influence status attainment in groups and organizations. Research has indeed provided empirical support for this signaling perspective of status. For example, individuals are remarkably accurate in assessing the status of a target through his or her behavioral displays of nonverbal engagement or disengagement (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Specifically, individuals with high socio-economic status displayed more disengaging nonverbal cues, such as doodling in the middle of social interactions, and fewer engaging nonverbal cues, such as head nods and laughs, and importantly, observers accurately estimated the socioeconomic status of these individuals based on the nonverbal cues (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Similarly, individuals who violate social norms (e.g., by putting their feet on the table) were also perceived to be more influential than those who did not engage in norm violation because these unconstrained behaviors in social settings resulted in observers' inferences of volition, an affordance of high power (Van Kleef, 2023; Van Kleef et al., 2011).

Together, these findings provide empirical support for a reciprocal positive relationship between social disengagement and status such that high-status individuals tend to be less socially engaging or prosocial in their interactions with others, and social disengagement can signal high status in groups or societies. This signaling perspective of status has important implications for status attainment in social contexts. In reviewing the self-presentational strategies that can lead to status conferral, Leary et al. (2014) argued that individuals purposefully display cues that are associated with high status (e.g., nicer cars, larger offices, or membership in exclusive groups), which can in turn lead to the conferral of high status. The signaling perspective of status suggests that social disengagement

can be an important status signal as well because observers tend to confer status on individuals who display social disengagement cues in social contexts such as during a social interaction (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Therefore, based on status research from a signaling perspective, we hypothesize the following.

Hypothesis 2. In social contexts, social disengagement cues increase status conferral, whereas social engagement cues decrease it.

Not only do we expect that social (dis)engagement cues should vary in effectiveness for producing status conferral based on context, but we also anticipate that matching the appropriate cues to the appropriate context in multiple-context scenarios should yield higher status. That is, we have argued that from a status conferral perspective, social disengagement cues, such as withholding benefits from a group and distancing oneself from its members, are most diagnostic and helpful in social contexts, and social engagement cues, such as contributing to a group and connecting with its members, are most diagnostic and effective in task contexts. Based on these predictions, it is logical that social engagement cues in task contexts and social disengagement cues in social contexts should result in the highest status conferral, whereas social disengagement cues in task contexts and social engagement cues in social contexts should result in the lowest status conferral when both contexts are present in groups or organizations. If a status candidate displays one more-appropriate and one less-appropriate cue, such as social disengagement in both task and social contexts (or social engagement in both task and social contexts), they are likely to offset, producing neither advantage nor disadvantage for status conferral. Based on this logic, we introduce a third, albeit more exploratory, hypothesis as follows.

Hypothesis 3. Social engagement and social disengagement in task and social contexts influence status conferral in an additive manner, with social engagement cues in task contexts and social disengagement cues in social contexts contributing more positively to status conferral.

It is important to note that although we distinguish task contexts from social contexts, pure task and pure social contexts are rare. Most of the time, social groups have some task to perform (e.g., playing a sport, coordinating an outing) and task groups have some element of sociality (e.g., coworkers going to lunch, collaborators talking about their personal lives). As such, the social (dis)engagement cues relevant to both contexts may influence status conferral. Of importance, we are most interested in status conferral processes that occur in groups and organizations in which both task contexts—such as working on a project—and social contexts—such as having a friendly conversation about personal matters—can be present. Therefore, we use "context" to refer to the immediate circumstances of a particular interaction, and not to the larger setting in which that interaction occurs. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a laboratory study (study 1) and an online experiment (study 2).

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Method

In study 1, participants viewed a video of a group of individuals completing a task and having a social conversation. We manipulated the statements by one of the group members to display social (dis) engagement cues in task and social contexts and then assessed how context and social (dis)engagement influenced status conferral.

3.2 | Participants

Two hundred and fifty-eight students in a large university in the Western United States participated in the study in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Participants were recruited from a business school participant pool.

3.3 | Procedure

Participants attended the study in sessions of up to 30 students. All members of a session were assigned to the same experimental condition and all sessions were run during a single 6-h period on 1 day. Participants were seated at individual computer workstations, with partitions to conceal each participant's monitor from others' view. At the start of each session, a 10-min stimulus video was projected onto a screen at the front of the room. This stimulus video, which was produced by the university's on-campus television studio using professional actors, showed four purported male college students interacting during a class assignment.

In the video, one of the four purported male college students (i.e., the focal target, or FT) delivered several scripted lines that displayed social (dis)engagement cues, during a conversation about the group's work task and a social conversation. In all conditions, the same four men were shown. With the exceptions discussed below, the conversation was the same in all videos: the actors delivered scripted lines, and almost all the same film footage was used. All conditions included a task conversation, in which the four men worked on a class assignment—to create a crisis communication plan for a company—and a social conversation, in which they supposedly had a break and chatted casually. Videos were edited to manipulate the order in which the task and social conversations were presented: half of the participants saw the task conversation first and half saw the social conversation first.

To manipulate social (dis)engagement, the script for the FT contained statements (three during the task and three during the social conversation) of social (dis)engagement. All the other actors' statements, and most of the FT's statements, were neutral with respect to status-relevant content. Social (dis)engagement cues and context of conversation were fully crossed, such that the FT either displayed social engagement cues in both task and social contexts (e.g., "I'm giving you guys some great ideas. Look at all these"; "Ahhhh, man,

I was out late last night. My friends just wouldn't let me go home, I was so much fun"), showed social disengagement cues in both task and social contexts (e.g., "I can't believe they waste my time with these ELC things"; "Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. This school is really going downhill. The people who went out last night were horrible"), displayed social engagement cues in the task context and social disengagement cues in the social context (e.g., "I'm giving you guys some great ideas. Look at all these"; "Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. This school is really going downhill. The people who went out last night were horrible"), or showed social disengagement cues in the task context and social engagement cues in the social context (e.g., "I can't believe they waste my time with these ELC things"; "Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. My friends just wouldn't let me go home, I was so much fun"). All statements of social (dis)engagement are displayed in Table 1. Entire scripts of the task and social conversations are presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. In addition, we included a control condition that did not have these social (dis)engagement cues and presented the task conversation first. The manipulations created a set of nine videos corresponding to our experimental design, with a total of 2 (task statements: social engagement vs. social disengagement) × 2 (social statements: social engagement vs. social disengagement) × 2 (order of presentation: task first vs. social first) + 1 (control) conditions. Across the nine conditions, there were 32 participants in the task disengagement, social engagement, and task first condition, 26 in the task disengagement, social engagement, and social first condition, 28 in the task disengagement, social disengagement, and task first condition, 27 in the task disengagement, social disengagement, and social first condition, 30 in the task engagement, social engagement, and task first condition, 29 in the task engagement, social engagement, and social first condition, 30 in the task engagement, social disengagement, and task first condition, 27 in the task engagement, social disengagement, and social first condition, and 29 in the control condition.

The social (dis)engagement statements that were delivered by the FT in the videos were written by one of the authors and reviewed and edited by three male advanced undergraduate students for realism and content. The consensually preferred statements were used in the script. We instructed the FT actor to deliver those lines with consistent emotional displays, showing pride while socially engaging, and showing contempt while socially disengaging. We used the prescriptions of Duchenne and de Boulogne (1990), Matsumoto and Ekman (2004), and Tracy and Robins (2004) to coach the FT actor on facial expressions. The neutral actors were also monitored carefully to ensure that they did not inadvertently display emotions in their own acting. To facilitate editing, all social (dis)engagement statements were shot using close-ups. Most of the video used a long shot that included all four actors at once. For balance, several close-ups were taken of the neutral actors delivering lines, and these were edited into the videos as well. After viewing the video, participants turned to their station computers to complete the dependent measure.

3.4 | Dependent measure

The dependent measure assessed the status that participants would confer upon the FT after viewing the stimulus video. We asked participants to respond to four questions about the FT: *I'd enjoy working with him; He would make a great colleague; Regardless of competence, he would be unpleasant to work with (R); His presence would make it miserable to complete a project (R)*. We created these items, which had several strengths: This measure allowed us to evaluate the implications of social behavior for work-relevant status conferral, and it correlated highly with other established measures of status. Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and were averaged together to form a composite score of status (α = .83). An exploratory factor analysis on these items revealed that they loaded on a single factor accounting for 67% of variance communality; all loadings >.58.

TABLE 1 Stimulus statements of the focal target (FT) across conditions (study 1).

Condition	Statements of the FT
Social engagement in a task context	I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class. I really like this idea I just suggested. I'm giving you guys some great ideas. Look at all these.
Social disengagement in a task context	I can't believe they waste my time with these ELC things. I don't think that's a great idea, but let's discuss it anyway. You guys don't have much there. I think we need to move on to getting something on paper though.
Social engagement in a social context	Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. My friends just wouldn't let me go home, I was so much fun. Oh man, Vegas, when I go there I rock that place. Guess you guys won't get to have me entertain you anymore now.
Social disengagement in a social context	Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. This school is really going downhill. The people who went out last night were horrible. Oh dude, you liked those? I thought those stories were stupid. Yeah, I definitely can't wait to get out of here…away from you people.

TABLE 2 Task conversation full script (study 1).

Characters
FG = focal guy
G2 = guy #2
G3 = guy #3
G4 = guy #4
FG (social engagement condition): *I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class*.
FG (social disengagement condition): *I can't believe they waste my time with these ELC things*.
[There is no response to this statement]
FG: Okay, so I guess we have to come up with some ideas first, right? They say do that for the first 5 minutes, and then go on to create the actual press release. If we're supposed to start with brainstorming, then we for sure need to address the whole wildlife scenario.
G2: Yeah, did you see the pictures of the oily ducks? That's brutal on public relations. That will be the only thing people remember.
G4: If this is a video press release, can we show footage of workers cleaning off ducks? It should totally be a spin job where we show clean pretty beaches that we've already cleaned up, or at least all the workers who are out there that we're paying for to clean off the seals and stuff.
G2: No footage of dead animals.
FG: Definitely not, that'd be PR suicide.
G3: How can we get around the fact that the damage already may be done with environmentalist types?
G2: Well, we just try to frame it well… we admit failure, but talk about how this tragedy has allowed us to show how we really are committed to the environment.
FG: Nice spin job.
G2: No, really… we say that before, we never really had a chance to show how much we care. This disaster has provided us an opportunity to demonstrate how far we'll go to fix our mistakes.
G4: Okay, maybe, we'll see…
G2: We should say that the animals are the biggest tragedy of it all, so people think we're serious and not just worried about all the money we lost.
G3: And even highlight the money we're spending to clean up.
G4: Like I said before, we just need to have strong visuals, no dead animals, and good footage of the ones that we're saving.
G3: The phrase "Whatever it costs" would be good, like "Acting responsibly, whatever it costs" or "We'll fix our mistakes, whatever it costs…"
FG: Maybe not that last one, because we don't want people to say, "Well, you shouldn't have made a mistake this big in the first place…"
G3: Yeah, maybe we should do a bit on what we're doing to prevent this from happening again?
FG: Yeah, we should definitely talk about that.
G2: We have to show that we abided by the Environmental Protection Agency, whatever standards that they have for operators of oil storage facilities.
FG: Maybe we can show that the EPA conducted an investigation before the actual spill, and they didn't find any problems with the ship.
G2: Yeah, and that way we can show that the problem was something that was nearly impossible.
FG: Cool, and we also may want to mention that that even though the problem was nearly impossible, we're now taking even more procedures to make sure it doesn't happen again.
G4: What steps do you guys think we can take?
G3: For one, we can create an internal council whose sole job would be for effective spill prevention, and also response.
G4: Something else may be to restrict operation during bad weather or at night. It was pretty bad that night, and the strong winds took the oil all over the place.
G2: I also heard that the guy operating the ship was really tired or something. The company can take a stance on certain rest times and stuff like truck drivers have to take.
G3: That seems like a problem that would be common with a lot of crews in a lot of ship companies. Excessive workloads should be limited and the crew being tired can definitely be avoided.
G2: The company can sponsor a rescue tug on call to assist vessels in distress. A ship that loses power or steering will be able to be towed or pushed to safety. That way the ship will be off the rocks and the cargo and fuel on board rather than in the water.
G4: The tug is also good because a mistake or mechanical failure could be a minor inconvenience. Without the tug, it could be the death of whales and the rest of the water environment. That message must be communicated.
G2: How about a tanker escort? There can be smaller ships that follow the tanker just in case something happens. That would be costly, but probably well worth it.
G3: What if there was booze on the ship? We should make a stance for all companies to not allow alcohol during operational hours.
FG: The point of the preventive measures has to show that the company is being proactive. If that message is communicated, I think we'll have the press lighten up on the negativity surrounding the situation.
G4: Make the message heard and show that the company is taking a position on showing that prevention is cheaper, financially and to the environment, rather than clean up measures.
FG (social engagement condition): *I really like this idea I just suggested*
FG (social disengagement condition): *I don't think that's a great idea, but let's discuss it anyway*.
G3: What about oil? That's kind of an obvious one, right?
G4: Uh—well yeah, the whole thing is obviously about oil…?
G3: No, no, I mean about oil like energy. You know, gasoline, like that. People want to say that an accident, a crash, whatever, that it's—when you have an oil spill, you know, it means this is bad, you know, for the environment or the country or whatever. But really we have this whole big issue about how much oil is there, and we get it from the Middle East and then there's terrorism and you have to go and fight wars and stuff…
FG: So put it as like a homeland security kind of thing, maybe…

(Continues)

G3: Maybe, but that might seem to be a negative. It could work if it was a good thing, so like the idea that instead of focusing on the spill, we say something about how much oil comes from Alaska and how much it, uh, constitutes a big part of the national oil supply. And how much we'd have to buy from the Middle East if we didn't have it.

FG: Yeah, that might work, something like, "there have been so many gallons collected and only X number of gallons spilled and to be independent on our energy it's definitely better to keep going."

G2: So does that sound like we're thinking someone is saying to stop drilling for oil in Alaska entirely? I mean, is that something anybody would even think?

FG: No, no, that's not how it would be. It wouldn't be like the debate is, do we stop drilling. It's just, look at everything this oil company is doing to make America safer and more independent. Look how much it provides of what everybody needs every day.

G4: OK, yeah, so you could show people filling up their cars at a gas station, or getting on airplanes—

G2: —Or turning on the lights in their house—

G4: —Yeah, a bunch of ways that they use energy every day, and show that all of this is coming courtesy of this oil company.

FG: So in a way it's like not even focus on the spill at all, but you just show, this is all the good that comes from the company.

G3: That would be the idea. I wonder if…

FG (social engagement condition): *I'm giving you guys some great ideas. Look at all these*.

FG (social disengagement condition): *You guys don't have much there. I think we need to move on to getting something on paper though*.

4 | RESULTS

To avoid contaminating the study responses, we conducted our manipulation check on a separate group of 71 participants drawn from the same participant pool. These participants read a transcript containing only the FT's scripted statements of social (dis)engagement across task or social context and rated the degree to which the FT *is rejecting others*, *thinks others are of low value*, and *is blaming others*. These items formed a reliable measure of social disengagement ($\alpha = .74$). Participants also rated the degree to which the FT *feels positively about his ability to perform*, *feels worthy of others' respect*, and *feels he deserves credit for some achievement*. These items formed a reliable measure of social engagement ($\alpha = .77$). First, we compared participants' ratings of FT's social engagement and disengagement in the task context with those in the social context to confirm that they did not differ across contexts. Results showed that participants who read the social engagement transcript in the task context ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.59$) did not rate the FT significantly higher on social engagement than did those who read the social engagement transcript in the social context ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 69) = 3.78$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. In addition, participants who read the social disengagement transcript in the task context ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.32$) did not rate the FT significantly higher on social disengagement than did those who read the social disengagement transcript in the social context

TABLE 3 Social conversation full script (study 1).

Characters
FG = focal guy
G2 = guy #2
G3 = guy #3
G4 = guy #4
FG (social engagement condition): *Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. My friends just wouldn't let me go home, I was so much fun*.
FG (social disengagement condition): *Ahhhh, man, I was out late last night. This school is really going downhill. The people who went out last night were horrible*.
[There is no response to this statement]
G4: So what about the game this weekend, did any of you go?
G2: Yeah, it was fun, my parents came up, we hung out all day long it was a good time. Bummer about the game though, you know?
G4: Yeah, losing in the last minute is so brutal. Always a heartbreak.
G3: My parents felt gypped out. And then I had to go home and work on that paper, too.
FG: Yeah, me too. How far'd you get?
G3: Ah, brainstormed most of the way. I'll finish up this week.
FG: At least it's been raining. You just sit inside so you might as well get work on it.
G2: Yeah, what's up with this rain? I came to school here for the sun, man, and here I am, practically living in Seattle.
FG: Where are you all from?
G2; I grew up in Oregon. Close to Portland, it's a place called Beaverton. It's like a suburb of Oregon. Real close to where the Nike headquarters is, actually.
FG: Nice. You?
G4: I grew up in Boston.
G3: I'm from here in LA. South Bay. What about you?
FG: San Juan Capistrano? You know where that is? Real close to Mission Viejo.
G2: I heard there's a Rainbow sandals factory down there, is that close by you?
G3: Wait, I thought that factory was northern California.
FG: Naw, it's down there, kinda close.
G4: So what are you all studying here?
G2: I'm actually not a business major, I'm bio-medical engineering. But I have a business minor, so I had to take marketing.
G3: Wow. BME. I have a couple roommates who are engineers. They study pretty hard.
FG: I'm a business student, was thinking about doing some sort of social science minor, but we'll see.
G4: Are you guys all sophomores, juniors, or what?
FG: Sophomore.
G3: Sophomore.

G4; Yeah, sophomore, me too.

G3: Are you taking finance right now or what? What other business classes?

G4: Yeah, finance, I have Merle for accounting right now, it's alright.

G3; I had him last semester. It was good, I like the Vegas stories.

FG (social engagement condition): *Oh man, Vegas, when I go there I rock that place.*

FG (social disengagement condition): *Oh dude, you liked those? I thought those stories were stupid.*

G4: I haven't been in a while. I should think about going soon.

FG: Have you guys been down here before?

G2: Yeah, a couple times.

G4: I'm taking OB right now, and we're down here all the time for that class.

G3: Yeah, me too. This place is a trip, the whole, "We're watching you from the one-sided glass, Hello Clarice."

G4: We're totally guinea pigs.

FG: Enh, yeah, but we're gonna be out of here soon.

G3: Yeah, when do we get to start working again?

FG (social engagement condition): *Guess you guys won't get to have me entertain you anymore now.*

FG (social disengagement condition): *Yeah, I definitely can't wait to get out of here… away from you people.*

($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.86$), $F(1, 69) = 0.11$, $p = .74$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. Because there were no statistically significant differences across the task and social contexts, we collapsed the two contexts and continued to examine the ratings of social engagement and disengagement based on the type of cues. Results showed that participants who read the social engagement transcript ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.24$) rated the FT significantly higher on social engagement than did those who read the social disengagement transcript ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 69) = 27.75$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .29$. In addition, participants who read the social disengagement transcript ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.49$) rated the FT significantly higher on social disengagement than did those who read the social engagement transcript ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 69) = 8.60$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Together, these results indicated that our manipulation of social (dis)engagement was effective.

To test hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on status conferral, with task statements and social statements as independent factors. The main effect of social statements was statistically significant, $F(1, 225) = 17.96$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. In the social context, social disengagement cues ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.45$) resulted in higher status than did social engagement cues ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.20$). In addition, the main effect of task statements was also statistically significant, $F(1, 225) = 16.41$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. In the task context, social engagement cues ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.40$) led to higher status than did social disengagement cues ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.27$). The two-way interaction of task statements and social statements was not statistically significant, $F(1, 225) = 2.27$, $p = .133$. These results provide empirical support for our main argument that social engagement cues can result in status conferral in task contexts, and social disengagement cues can lead to status conferral in social contexts. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

To test hypothesis 3, which was more exploratory, we conducted a linear contrast analysis to examine whether status was lowest when the FT displayed social engagement cues in the social context and social disengagement cues in the task context, and highest with social disengagement cues in the social context and social engagement cues in the task context. The contrast was calculated such that the condition with social disengagement cues in the task context and social engagement cues in the social context was weighted −1; the two conditions with social disengagement cues in task and social contexts and social engagement cues in task and social contexts were weighted 0; and the condition with social engagement cues in the task context and social disengagement cues in the social context was weighted +1. As expected, the linear pattern was statistically significant, $F(2, 226) = 18.43$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. The nature of this effect is illustrated in Figure 1.

As additional exploratory analyses, both the straightforward ANOVA model and the linear contrast analysis also included order of presentation (task or social statements first) as a factor in their respective models, along with all interactions. Both models showed statistically significant order effects. In the ANOVA model, this included a significant main effect of order, $F(1, 221) = 4.01$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; a two-way interaction of task statements and order, $F(1, 221) = 10.34$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$; and a three-way interaction of task statements, social statements, and order, $F(1, 221) = 4.72$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. For the linear contrast model, both order, $F(1, 223) = 6.81$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and the interaction of the linear contrast and order, $F(2, 223) = 6.97$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, were statistically significant.

In short, the order of presentation anchored participants' impressions on the specific social (dis)engagement cues most relevant to that context: When the social context appeared first, social disengagement statements in the social context led to higher status, regardless of the nature of the task statements, whereas social engagement statements in the social context led to lower status. When the task context appeared first, social engagement statements in the task context led to higher status, regardless of the nature of the social statements, whereas social disengagement statements in the task context led to lower status. In addition, the positive effects of social disengagement cues in the social context and social engagement cues in the task context were particularly pronounced when the task context was presented first.

Finally, we replicated the linear contrast analysis of status conferral including the control condition. As shown in Figure 2, the control condition did not differ significantly from the social engagement in both task and social contexts or the social disengagement in both task and social contexts conditions, $F(1, 141) = 0.04$, $p = .835$. Furthermore, these two conditions did not differ from each other, $F(1, 112) = 0.02$, $p = .899$. Thus, social disengagement cues in a task context and social engagement cues in a social context lowered the FT's status, relative to baseline

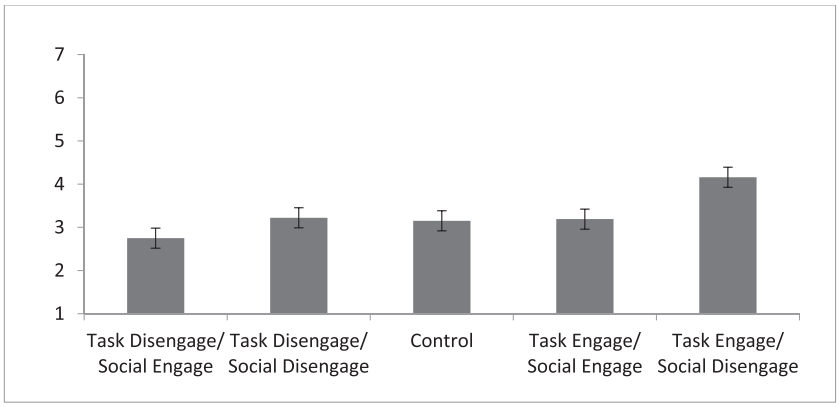

FIGURE 1 *Status as a function of condition (study 1).* Analyses collapse across order. *y*-axis represents status measure; ratings were made on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).

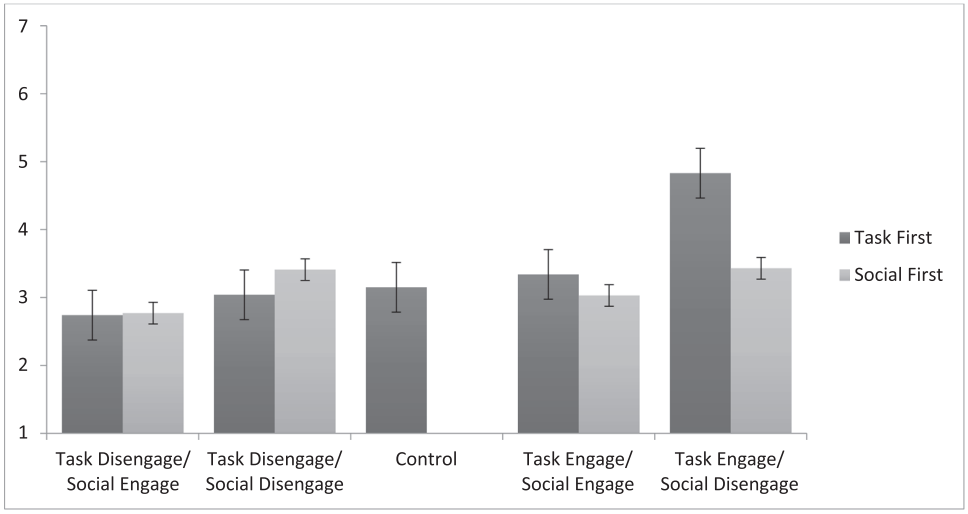

FIGURE 2 *Status as a function of condition, by order of context presentation (study 1).* *y*-axis represents status measure; ratings were made on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).

(control), whereas social engagement cues in a task context and social disengagement cues in a social context raised it. Social engagement cues (or social disengagement cues) in both contexts was no different from baseline (control). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported.

5 | DISCUSSION

In study 1, we tested our hypotheses in a laboratory study and found empirical evidence that whereas social engagement cues helped status candidates to attain status in task contexts, social disengagement cues were more effective for status attainment in social contexts. However, because the sample size of study 1 was small relative to the number of experimental conditions and the stimulus materials were presented in a video that made the deliveries, especially of social disengagement statements, appear emotionally strong in a face-to-face setting, more empirical evidence was needed to further support our hypothesized effects. In study 2, we sought to retest our hypotheses in an online experiment in which the stimulus materials were presented in a text format. In addition, we also increased the sample size and included more established measures of status.

6 | STUDY 2

6.1 | Method

To further test our hypotheses, we conducted a second study in which participants watched a live group chat between three students, which was computer-programmed. As in study 1, one of these students was the FT and delivered stimulus statements. Sample size, exclusion criteria, and hypotheses in study 2 were preregistered a priori on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/yx5mt/).

6.2 | Participants

We recruited 220 participants from Prolific Academic, an online survey platform with a large and diverse pool of participants, in

exchange for monetary payment. Three participants failed our attention check question and, in accordance with the preregistration, were excluded from the analyses, leaving a final sample size of $n = 217$. Of these participants, 49.8% were female, 48.8% were male, and 1.4% self-identified as Other. In terms of ethnicity, 55.3% were White or European Descent, 13.8% were Latino or Hispanic, 13.4% were Black or African Descent, 12.0% were Asian or Asian Descent, 3.7% were Native American, Indigenous, or First Peoples, and 1.8% self-identified as Other. Participants had a mean of 38.97 years of age ($SD = 12.69$).

6.3 | Procedure

After consenting to take part in the study, participants were directed to a live group chat that was programmed to involve three purported students interacting with one another by typing in messages. The three students in the group chat were named person 1, person 2, and person 3, and had an avatar of a fox, an owl, and a squirrel, respectively. The experimental design was 2 (context: task vs. social) × 2 (cue type: engagement vs. disengagement). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (i.e., task engagement, task disengagement, social engagement, and social disengagement) and asked to watch the group chat carefully. They were also instructed to pay particular attention to person 1, or the student with the fox avatar, and note this student's ideas, what this student says, and how this student relates to the others in the group.

As in study 1, the context of the conversation (i.e., task vs. social) was manipulated such that participants in the task condition saw the students interacting in the group chat to work on a class project of creating a crisis communication plan for a company, whereas participants in the social condition watched the students chatting casually about what classes they were taking at the school. To manipulate social (dis)engagement, person 1, or the student with the fox avatar, delivered two stimulus statements during the group chat. In the social engagement condition, the two statements conveyed an intent to connect with the other students and contribute to the group (i.e., *I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class. I am glad that we can think about this together before we create the actual press release*, and *Yeah, so can we keep chatting a bit more before they let us go?*). In the social disengagement condition, the two statements signaled an intent to distance oneself from the other students and withhold benefits from the group (i.e., *I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class. I'd be better off working on my own to create this press release*, and *Yeah, so can we just not keep chatting before they let us go?*). The group chats in task and social conditions are presented in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

TABLE 4 Group chat task condition (study 2).

P1 (social engagement condition): *I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class. I am glad that we can think about this together before we create the actual press release.*
P1 (social disengagement condition): *I've done a communication strategy project exactly like this before, and I got the highest grade in the class. I'd be better off working on my own to create this press release.*
P2: Well, if this is a video press release, can we show footage of workers cleaning off the oily ducks? It should totally be a spin job where we show clean pretty beaches that we've already cleaned up, or at least all the workers who are out there that we're paying to clean off the seals and stuff.
P3: No footage of dead animals, though. That'd be PR suicide.
P1: We should say that the animals are the biggest tragedy of it all, so people think we're serious and not just worried about all the money we lost.
P2: And even highlight the money we're spending to clean up.
P3: Like I said before, we just need to have strong visuals, no dead animals, and good footage of the ones that we're saving.
P1: Agreed
P2: We have to show that we abided by the Environmental Protection Agency, whatever standards that they have for operators of oil storage facilities.
P3: Cool, and we also may want to mention that even though the problem was nearly impossible to prevent, we're now taking even more procedures to make sure it doesn't happen again.
P1 (social engagement condition): *I just had this great idea, and I would like to share it with you guys.*
P1 (social disengagement condition): *I just had this great idea, but I don't feel like sharing it with you guys right now.*

6.4 | Dependent measures

6.4.1 | Status

To assess the status that participants would confer upon person 1 after watching the live group chat, we retained the four items that we used in study 1 and added several items from more established measures of status in the literature. Specifically, we incorporated six items to capture both the influence dimension (i.e., *person 1 has a high-ranking position in the group* and *other members of the group follow the lead of person 1*) and respect dimension of status (i.e., person 1 has high status, person 1 is respected, *person 1 is highly esteemed*, and *person 1 is prestigious*) (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Bendersky & Shah, 2012). All items of status were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). To facilitate comparisons across the two studies and assess the degree of correlation between the status measure in study 1 and the more established measures of status, we created three composite scores of status, the first with the four status items from study 1 ($\alpha = .96$), the second with

TABLE 5 Group chat social condition (study 2).

P1: So what are you all studying here?
P2: I'm actually not a business major, I'm bio-medical engineering. But I have a business minor, so I had to take marketing.
P3: I'm a business student, was thinking about doing some sort of social science minor, but we'll see. Are you guys all sophomores, juniors, or what?
P2: Sophomore.
P1: Sophomore.
P3: Yeah, me too. Are you taking finance right now or what? What other business classes?
P2: Yeah, finance, I have Merle for accounting right now, it's good. I like those Vegas stories.
P1 (social engagement condition): *Me, too! All of us in the class thought those stories were cool*.
P1 (social disengagement condition): *You liked them? The rest of us in the class thought those stories were stupid*.
P3: I haven't been in Vegas in a while. I should think about going soon.
P2: Maybe after finishing this study thing?
P3: Yeah, I think we're gonna be out of here soon.
P1 (social engagement condition): *Yeah, so can we keep chatting a bit more before they let us go?*
P1 (social disengagement condition): *Yeah, so can we just not keep chatting before they let us go?*

TABLE 6 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of three status measures (study 2).

	M	*SD*	(1)	(2)
(1) Status	4.21	1.72		
(2) Respect-based status	3.99	0.98	.46**	
(3) Influence-based status	3.88	1.25	.38**	.73**

**$p < .01$.

the four items of respect-based status ($\alpha = .85$), and the third with the two items of influence-based status ($r = .72$). Descriptive statistics and correlations among the three status measures are presented in Table 6.

6.4.2 | Other measures

We used two items to evaluate the effectiveness of our manipulation of context: *The group chat was a task conversation in which the students worked on an assignment* and *The group chat was a social conversation in which the students chatted casually*. Similarly, we used two items to evaluate the effectiveness of our manipulation of social (dis)engagement: *In the group chat, person 1 (the student with the FOX avatar) showed an intent to connect with the other two students* and *In the group chat, person 1 (the student with the FOX avatar) showed an intent to distance themself from the other two students*. All four items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*).

7 | RESULTS

To check the effectiveness of our manipulations of context and social (dis)engagement, we examined participants' answers to the four manipulation check items. For the manipulation of context, results showed that participants in the task condition ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.48$) agreed that the group chat was a task conversation significantly more than those in the social condition ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.44$), $F(1, 218) = 290.51$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .57$. Participants in the social condition ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 0.75$) agreed that the group chat was a social conversation significantly more than those in the task condition ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.96$), $F(1, 218) = 101.27$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. For the manipulation of social (dis)engagement, results indicated that participants in the social engagement condition ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 0.99$) agreed that person 1 showed an intent to connect with the other students significantly more than those in the social disengagement condition ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.93$), $F(1, 218) = 95.08$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$. Participants in the social disengagement condition ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.94$) agreed that person 1 showed an intent to distance themself from the other students significantly more than those in the social engagement condition ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.86$), $F(1, 218) = 172.92$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .44$. Together, these results indicated that our manipulations of context and social (dis)engagement were effective.

To test hypothesis 1, which predicts that social engagement cues are more effective for status conferral than social disengagement cues in task contexts, we ran a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on status conferral. When status was measured with the four original items in study 1, the effect of social engagement was statistically significant, $F(1, 106) = 71.99$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .40$, with social engagement cues ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.41$) resulting in higher status than social disengagement cues ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.44$). When status was measured with the four items of respect-based status, the effect of social engagement was also statistically significant, $F(1, 106) = 7.81$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, with social engagement cues ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.94$) again resulting in higher status than social disengagement cues ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.09$). When status was measured with the two items of influence-based status, the effect of social engagement was also statistically significant, $F(1, 106) = 13.93$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, with social engagement cues ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.10$) again resulting in higher status than social disengagement cues ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.37$). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

We then proceeded to test hypothesis 2, which predicts that social disengagement cues are more effective for status conferral than social engagement cues in social contexts, with a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on status conferral. When status was measured with the four original items in study 1, the effect of social disengagement was statistically significant, $F(1, 107) = 51.20$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. Contrary to our prediction, social disengagement

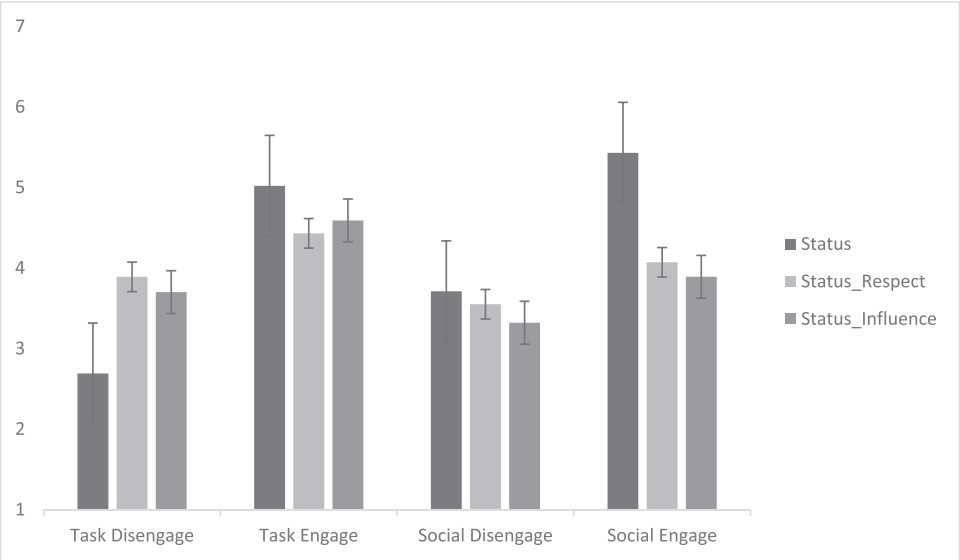

FIGURE 3 *Three measures of status as a function of condition (study 2). y*-axis represents status measure; ratings were made on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).

cues ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.57$) resulted in lower status than social engagement cues ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.85$). When status was measured with the four items of respect-based status, the effect of social disengagement was also statistically significant, $F(1, 107) = 10.32$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Again, contrary to our prediction, social disengagement cues ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.99$) resulted in lower status than social engagement cues ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.69$). When status was measured with the two items of influence-based status, the effect of social disengagement was also statistically significant, $F(1, 107) = 7.46$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Again, contrary to our prediction, social disengagement cues ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.20$) resulted in lower status than social engagement cues ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.98$). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported. The nature of the results in study 2 is presented in Figure 3.

8 | DISCUSSION

In study 2, we sought to replicate the findings of study 1 by testing our hypotheses with a larger sample and established measures of status in an online experiment in which stimulus statements were presented in a text format. As in study 1, we found empirical support for hypothesis 1. In the task context, results showed that the display of social engagement cues led to higher status than social disengagement cues, suggesting that demonstrating one's intent to contribute to the group and connect with its members is beneficial for status attainment in the task context. However, we did not find empirical support for hypothesis 2. In the social context, results indicated that the display of social disengagement cues led to lower status than social engagement cues, suggesting that signaling one's intent to withhold benefits from the group and distance oneself from its members was not consistently beneficial, and can even be detrimental, for status attainment in the social context. We discuss these inconsistent findings across the two studies in more depth in Section 9.

9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this research, we integrated the functionalist and signaling perspectives of status and proposed and tested a context dependent account of social (dis)engagement and status conferral in groups. The results of a laboratory study and an online experiment provided partial empirical support for our argument that the relationship between social (dis)engagement and status depends on the context in which status conferral occurs. In task contexts, we found consistent empirical evidence that social engagement cues that signaled one's intent to contribute to the group and connect with its members resulted in status attainment. In social contexts, however, empirical evidence was mixed such that social disengagement cues that signaled one's intent to withhold benefits from the group and distance oneself from its members enhanced one's status when these cues were delivered verbally in a video that also contained nonverbal (i.e., visual and vocal) stimuli (study 1) and diminished one's status when they were delivered only through text in a chat format (study 2).

Our work makes several contributions to the literature on status. First, it enhances our understanding of the status conferral processes by distinguishing between the task and social contexts, thus adding to a growing literature on the influence of context on status dynamics in groups and organizations (e.g., DesJardins et al., 2015; Grosz et al., 2020; Li et al., 2016). For example, contextual variables such as the nature of the group task and the culture of the group members can moderate the relationship between personality and status attainment (Grosz et al., 2020). Also, DesJardins et al. (2015) found

that how personalities such as extraversion and agreeableness are associated with status depends on the nature of the group interactions (i.e., affiliative vs. competitive). Our work answers the increasing calls to pay more attention to the important role of context in status research (Grosz et al., 2020; Li et al., 2016) by investigating the context dependent relationship between social (dis)engagement cues and status conferral.

Second, our research extends the current understanding of status conferral by integrating two different perspectives (i.e., functionalist and signaling) within the status literature. Existing accounts of status conferral (e.g., the functionalist perspective) tend to focus on competence and performance, paired with the benefits that a person—a candidate for status—offers others, which signals one's intent to connect with others and contribute to the group. Drawing on the signaling perspective of status, our work shows that, in social contexts, observers can respond positively when they can infer that the status candidate has the latitude to be socially disengaging without cost to the self. Therefore, the display of an intent to withhold benefits from a group and distance oneself from its members, which is a social disengagement cue that is previously overlooked in the status literature, can itself serve as a status signal and foundation of status conferral in social contexts.

However, it is worth noting that the effects of social disengagement on status conferral in social contexts appear to be more complex than we originally expected. The inconsistent findings across the two studies can be explained by at least two important differences in the study design. First, whereas the stimulus materials (e.g., social disengagement statements) were delivered verbally by the FT in a video that also contained nonverbal cues including his emotional expressions and vocal qualities in study 1, they were presented as written messages in a group chat that was devoid of the nonverbal aspects of communication in study 2. Because nonverbal communication can play a critical role in status conferral processes (e.g., Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Gregory & Webster, 1996; Martens et al., 2012; Shariff & Tracy, 2009), the dynamics of status conferral as a function of social disengagement cues in social contexts can also differ based on the amount of observable nonverbal cues in social interactions. For example, the nonverbal expression of pride (Martens et al., 2012; Shariff & Tracy, 2009), or confidence in someone's voice (Gregory & Webster, 1996) can serve as important status signals in a group setting and influence status perceptions, which could potentially explain the lack of a positive relationship between social disengagement cues and status conferral in study 2.

A second plausible explanation for the inconsistent findings across the two studies lies with the differences in the characteristics of the two samples. Whereas participants in study 1 consisted of undergraduate students who were asked to observe their fellow undergraduate students interacting with one another to complete a class assignment and chat casually about their school life, those in study 2 were online working adults who were both older in age and arguably less familiar with the content of the group interactions including the status-related diagnostic information, especially in the social context, as the students in the group chat were talking about their experiences in taking an undergraduate course. Therefore, compared with a long, face-to-face group interaction in study 1, a significantly shorter, text-based group chat in study 2 might not have presented sufficient, relevant information that would have allowed the intended status dynamics to become salient to the online participants.

Third, our conception of a social context for status conferral, and a status judgment based on social (dis)engagement cues, go beyond the effects of social competence theorized in past research. Social competence refers to the ability to use social relationships and interactions to achieve one's goals. Social competence includes such behaviors as effective communication, emotional intelligence, ability to make oneself liked (or not), and related social skills. Social (dis) engagement, on the other hand, reflects the degree to which one extends the benefits of one's competence to a group and connects with its members. Thus, our work helps to further make sense of some of the recent scholarship regarding status. In particular, although much work has shown how status hierarchies in groups and organizations are functional and beneficial for those at all levels of those hierarchies, some recent studies have illuminated the disturbing truths about hierarchy development. The right people are not always granted high status in groups and organizations—those who display extreme confidence, for example, gain status even when they are demonstrably incompetent (Anderson et al., 2012). Furthermore, although extraverts court and win status, they often perform badly, whereas neurotics feel undeserving of status despite their tendency to perform much better (Bendersky & Shah, 2012). Because overconfidence and extraversion covary (Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2004) with autonomy, self-determination, and arrogance (Brunell et al., 2008; Kaiser & Hogan, 2007), perhaps the status judgments catalogued by recent research reflect not only failures to judge one's competence but also responsiveness to signals of one's social disengagement such as withholding benefits from a group and distancing oneself from its members.

Our work also has important practical implications. For example, our work explains why group and organizational members sometimes confer status onto someone who is obnoxious and does not seem to be interested in promoting others' welfare. Groups and organizations that want to deploy status hierarchy in the service of performance should be concerned with ensuring that the status hierarchy is based on functional, performance-oriented, competence-based dimensions, rather than pure social dynamics. Being aware of this alternate route to status that is based on social disengagement cues in the social contexts allows groups and organizations to take action to draw members' attention to desired attributes and to make social dynamics explicit—and explicitly devalued during the status granting processes. By working to make status decisions more consciously, groups and organizations can take full advantage of a functional hierarchy in which individuals who are both competent and socially engaging are granted high status.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors extend deep thanks to Saurabh Shah, Ryan Swagerty, and Chris Delaney, who assisted with scripting and coding the first

study; and to Emily Tansuwan, for her developmental feedback and insights.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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How to cite this article: Zhang, T., & Overbeck, J. R. (2024). The effects of social (dis)engagement on status conferral: A context dependent account. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *54*, 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.13023