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Introduction

Of all the misperceptions in international politics, perhaps the most grievous is embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, which declares that the organization “is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.” A laudatory notion, but one belied by hundreds of years of international politics and human nature itself. The fundamental ordering principle of international politics is hierarchy, not equality. And while guns and tanks are easy to count, far more can be explained by things that we cannot see, hear, or hold. It is ultimately on *status*, not bullets, that “the success or failure of all international policies” rests.¹ But status is more even than the “everyday currency of international relations,” because status is also the end goal for political leaders, many of whom are plainly obsessed with investing in, seizing, and defending it.²

Smoking gun quotes and tales abound. In a 1952 cabinet memo that foreshadowed the war decades later, British officials argued that the Falklands must be retained, since “public admission of our inability to maintain these traditional possessions would cause *a loss of prestige wholly out of proportion to the saving in money obtained.*”³ Friedrich von Holstein, a German diplomat during the 1911 Agadir Crisis, asserted that Germany must escalate the Moroccan crisis “not for material reasons alone, but even more *for the sake of prestige.*”⁴ Later, on the eve of World War I, Russian leaders seemed wholly preoccupied with the threat to the regime’s status if they should fail to meet the challenge issued by Germany. Russia refused to back down, despite the near certainty that its odds would be far better if it delayed the conflict for one or two years. Czar Nicholas explained this otherwise-puzzling decision to the Russian people by referring to the

¹ Wohlforth 1998, 26.

² Gilpin 1983, 31.

³ Quoted in Wood 2013, 11, emphasis added.

⁴ Quoted in Snyder 1991, 78, emphasis added.

need to “protect the honor, dignity and safety of Russia *and its position among the Great Powers*.”⁵ This is exactly what Germany wanted, since it had manipulated the situation precisely to play on the czar’s concern for status: a 1913 memo from German prime minister Bethmann Hollweg stated that it would be “almost impossible for Russia, *without an enormous loss of prestige* ... to look on without acting during a military advance against Serbia by Austria-Hungary.”⁶

Not all tales of status in world politics involve war and peace; some cast world leaders in an almost-petty light. At his coronation in 1804, Napoléon arranged an informal meeting with the pope, who was in attendance. While both were competing for political and economic dominance over Europe, Napoléon got the upper hand by arranging his horse carriage in such a way that the pope was forced to dirty his shoes.⁷ At the Potsdam conference in 1945, the leaders of the three great powers of the day—Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin—could not agree on the order they’d enter into the conference room. It was eventually decided that all three should enter simultaneously through separate doors.⁸ Vladimir Putin reportedly declined the invitation to a G8 summit at Camp David in 2012 so that he could avoid the humiliation of leaving when the leaders of other nations went to Chicago for a NATO summit to which he was not invited.⁹

While it can be difficult to escape the image of world leaders stuck in a door frame, Three Stooges style, these anecdotes touch on concerns far more serious than they might first appear. Status is valuable, not least because it “confers tangible benefits in the form of decision-making autonomy and deference.”¹⁰ Certainly, efforts to gain prestige may sometimes be both costly and risky, but “if they succeed, they can bring rewards all out of proportion to [those] costs by influencing the psychological environment and policies of other decision-makers.”¹¹ Even if status was useless as a currency (and it is not), it would still be sought after for the psychological benefits it confers on its holders. Thus, for leaders, a combination of intrinsic motivation—evolution has ensured that increased

⁵ Quoted in Lieven 1983, 147, emphasis added.

⁶ Quoted in Hewitson 2004, 204, emphasis added.

⁷ Morgenthau 1948, 70–71.

⁸ Midlarsky 1975, 105.

⁹ Larson and Shevchenko 2014b, 274.

¹⁰ Wohlforth 1998, 26.

¹¹ Jervis 1989, 8.

status makes us feel good—and instrumental benefits—higher status brings tangible benefits in security, wealth, and influence—makes status one of the most sought-after qualities in world politics.¹²

So far, we are on uncontroversial, even staid ground; scholars from every corner of political science, along with their real-world counterparts in the White House (and Kremlin) agree on the critical importance of status. Yet the broad agreement that “status matters” has left us in a peculiar situation. While there is considerable agreement within the political science discipline and foreign policy community that status matters in world affairs, the depth of our understanding has lagged far behind our confidence. For all the bombastic declarations, there is too little in the way of focused research on *how* and *when* status matters. Qualitative work on this subject has been illuminating, but unable to establish patterns across time and space.¹³ Similarly, cross-national quantitative research on status and conflict has established an excellent foundation for future inquiries, but has yet to generate concrete, replicable findings on the subject.¹⁴

Thus, our understanding of status in international politics has been guided by intuition, not evidence, and this has left us with a significant gap. There is still much we do not know about how status affects foreign policy behavior and international outcomes, and what we do “know” is often based on surprisingly little evidence. What we need—and what this book provides—is a systematic investigation into the ways that status concerns affect the behavior of states and leaders, especially as these concerns relate to the propensity for military conflict.

This book begins that process by proposing a theory of status dissatisfaction designed to address the following questions. *When* does status matter: under what circumstances do concerns over relative status overshadow the myriad other concerns that decision makers face in complex international environments? *How* does status matter: what specific outcomes do status concerns trigger, and what strategies do states and leaders use to improve their rank? Finally, *which* types of status are most important? If status is standing in a hierarchy, then leaders may construct a virtually unlimited number of hierarchies based on different attributes (for example, wealth or power) and composed of different groups of competitors. Put more plainly, *who* forms the relevant comparison group for different types of

¹² Plourde 2008.

¹³ See, for example, Offer 1995; Markey 2000; Hymans 2006; Wohlforth 2009; Larson and Shevchenko 2010b; Murray 2010.

¹⁴ See, for example, Wallace 1971; Ray 1974; Volgy and Mayhall 1995; Maoz 2010.

states? This book addresses these questions while also shedding light on perennial dilemmas of foreign policy such as how status quo actors can accommodate dissatisfied powers (for example, modern-day China or pre-World War I Wilhelmine Germany) using status-based incentives.

THE CASE FOR STATUS

Status in international politics is *standing, or rank, in a status community*. It has three critical attributes—it is positional, perceptual, and social—that combine to make any actor’s status position a function of the higher-order, collective beliefs of a given community of actors. There are two ways in which the term is commonly used. The first refers to status in its most purely positional sense: *standing*, an actor’s rank or position in a hierarchy. “Status community” is defined as a hierarchy composed of the group of actors that a state perceives itself as being in competition with. “Rank” is one’s ordinal position and is determined by the collective beliefs of members of that community. Since status is based on higher-order beliefs, there is no objective, time-invariant formula for what qualities or attributes confer status. The second meaning of status is as an *identity* or membership in a group, such as “status *as* a major power.” Status can thus be “about” belonging to a given group or ranking in a hierarchy, but in either case, positionality is critical.

Status refers to the actual position or identity of a state. While either position or identity might have some explanatory power on its own, my focus is on status *concerns*. Status concerns denote the level of focus on status-related issues, and the likelihood of acting in order to advance or salvage one’s status. A concern for status might be sparked by a perceived threat to one’s status position or rank, but this is not a necessary condition. In this manner, status concerns are a larger conceptual category that includes “status threats” as one precipitating cause among several. Put slightly differently, status concerns may lead to *status seeking*—behavior or actions undertaken in order to gain status—but may also lead to actions designed to preserve one’s current position or slow one’s decline (neither of which is accurately captured by the term “status seeking”). Status concerns are orthogonal to status itself, since both high- and low-ranked actors may evince powerful status concerns.

Why focus on status? In justifying or explaining a research program, scholars have several rationales from which to choose. Sometimes the case

is made that something is important conceptually or theoretically, while at other times the case is made empirically—it helps explain something—or based on intuition or common understanding (“we all agree this is important”). It is rare that the case can be made on all these levels and more, but such is the case for status.

A Broad Consensus

The “case for status” rests on three pillars, the first of which is the broad agreement that status matters in world politics. This wide-ranging consensus crosses disciplinary and epistemological boundaries, and might truly be said to be one of the few facts on which world leaders and political scientists agree.

The first element of this consensus is the strong belief among scholars that status (in some shape or form) affects outcomes of importance across international relations, including behavior related to international organizations, nuclear proliferation and testing, humanitarian interventions, and international political economy.¹⁵ A recent study summarized its findings by noting that “status seeking and dominating behavior may be as important as raw aggression in affecting the likelihood of international conflict.”¹⁶ A related belief follows that status concerns have been *particularly* important to certain countries, such as Russia, Norway, India, China, or France.¹⁷ A hyperbolic, but by no means unusual, statement in this vein is that “[China] may very well be the most status-conscious country in the world.”¹⁸

Policy makers and leaders are, for once, in agreement with political scientists. In government circles, the desire for status is cited as a key factor in nuclear proliferation, the rise of China and Russia, conflict in Syria, and a multitude of other issues.¹⁹ There is also a long history of policy-oriented political scientists encouraging government programs devoted to leveraging what is often seen as a universal desire for status.

¹⁵ Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006; Levite 2003; O’Neill 2006; Löwenheim 2003; Elkins and Simmons 2004.

¹⁶ Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005, 267.

¹⁷ Mandelbaum 1998; Leira 2015; Miller 2013; Larson and Shevchenko 2010b; Hecht and Callon 2009.

¹⁸ Deng 2008, 8.

¹⁹ Ferguson 2010; Semple and Schmitt 2014; Birnbaum 2014; Landler 2014.

Political scientists will likely be aware of the work of Larson and colleagues, who urge the United States to provide status incentives to Russia and China. They might be unaware, however, that Hans Morgenthau himself made similar pleas over a half century ago (he referred to them as “status bribes”).²⁰

The case for status is often substantiated via leaders’ public and private statements. For example, General Matthew Ridgway wrote to his superiors concerning strategy in Korea that the official US policy was “particularly debilitating to our prestige.”²¹ David Lloyd George described Britain’s position during the 1911 Agadir Crisis in his famous Mansion House speech by forcefully arguing that “Britain should at all hazards maintain her place and prestige among the Great Powers of the world,” and that “if a situation were to be forced” on it that required it surrendering “the great and beneficent position Britain has won,” then “peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable” for a “great country” like Britain to endure.²²

The rationale for giving a place of prominence to status holds no matter which level or actor one places the focus on. For example, a renewed emphasis on leader-specific factors in international relations suggests we should take seriously those factors that affect individual-level decision making.²³ Notably, there is a strong consensus that status is a critically important human motivation and “universal feature of social groups.”²⁴ High-status individuals benefit in real economic terms from the deference (i.e., preferential treatment) shown to them by lower-ranked individuals.²⁵ High-status individuals also enjoy significant physical and mental health benefits as well as greater access to younger and healthier mates.²⁶ High-status individuals are even perceived as possessing different “intrinsic” qualities than low-status individuals, who are in turn likely to adopt unfavorable beliefs about themselves to explain their lower ranks.²⁷ Status positions even affect how we see the world. For example, high-status

²⁰ Larson and Shevchenko 2010b; Morgenthau 1962.

²¹ Quoted in Stueck 1997, 241. For more on prestige issues in the Korean War, see Whiting 1968.

²² Quoted in Onea 2014, 148.

²³ Hudson 2005; Saunders 2009; Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Colgan 2013; Horowitz and Stam 2014.

²⁴ Frank 1985; Tetlock 1985; Barkow 1989, Cheng et al. 2013, 104.

²⁵ Ball and Eckel 1998; Ball et al. 2001.

²⁶ Singh-Manoux, Adler, and Marmot 2003; Marmot 2005; Adler et al. 2000; Akinola and Mendes 2014; Hopcroft 2006; von Rueden, Gurven, and Kaplan 2011.

²⁷ Gerber 1996; Ridgeway and Balkwell 1997.

individuals hear louder applause for themselves and use different language when they speak.²⁸ In short, the tremendous benefits that status confers on individuals who possess it help explain why status seeking is such a fundamental motive for leaders.

The justification still holds, however, if we abstract away from the role of the individual political leader—that is, if we “black box” the state and focus our attention on the international system as a whole. Though the system is anarchic, in the sense of lacking a recognized authority with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, it is not unordered or “flat.”²⁹ It is in fact ordered, or ranked, on many dimensions, leading Lake to describe international hierarchies as “pervasive.”³⁰ Of course, the most obvious set of status hierarchies in international relations are those based on material capabilities or power. But hierarchies based on moral authority, norms, and international law compliance are prevalent as well. Put simply, even if the system as a whole *is* anarchic, nearly all relationships and interactions within that system are characterized by hierarchy and permeated with patterns of dominance and subordination.³¹

Empirical Benefits

The second pillar on which the case for status rests is its empirical usefulness. Here is where one begins to sense a divergence. On the one hand, scholars have been confident in attributing status-seeking motives to states and leaders. For example, Mastanduno, describing the Cold War dynamic, writes that “U.S. officials worried greatly, some would say obsessively, about the costs to U.S. credibility and prestige.”³² The confidence with which status is pronounced to be driving behavior and outcomes, though, belies the amount of evidence we have in favor of such explanations.

There is far less evidence concerning the impact of status than one would expect, and certainly too little to match our confident declarations. As an example, despite the recent turn toward causal inference in political science, there is no evidence for a causal effect of status on anything related

²⁸ Pettit and Sivanathan 2012; Kacewicz et al. 2014.

²⁹ Perhaps not as much as commonly believed, however. See Milner 1991; Powell 1994.

³⁰ Lake 2011.

³¹ Lake 2007.

³² Mastanduno 1997, 57.

to international politics. Even if we relax the high standards typically required to discuss causal explanations, there is surprisingly little empirical work on the subject (though that has certainly begun to change over the last few years). To be sure, there is good research out there (and more every year), but it is typically bound by strict criteria, such as a small group of states or narrow time period. Evidence of status' impact *on world affairs* is thus not causally identified, but nor is it particularly comprehensive or far-reaching.

A second aspect of the empirical justification for status is its potential ability to solve puzzles that would otherwise be mystifying. Why were leaders in Wilhelmine Germany so fixated on status concerns? What is the link between status and war? Why don't more states offer the "status bribes" suggested by Morgenthau, and why do some states not accept them when they are offered? Just as important, what are the methods states can use to gain status, and have those changed over time? No single book can answer all the questions it poses, but this book aims to begin the systematic empirical investigation of the nature and consequences of status concerns.

Synthesis

The third pillar on which my case for status rests is the concept's utility in bringing together myriad approaches to international relations (IR). For constructivists, the perceptual and social nature of status make it a natural focus. Lebow provides one of the strongest arguments in this vein, stating that for several hundred years, "honor and prestige were even more important than security and wealth," and in a later work declared prestige to have been the driving motive in 62 percent of the wars fought since 1648.³³ A related literature on status has drawn extensively from Social Identity Theory to examine how rising powers such as Russia and China have attempted to maintain and increase their status.³⁴

Nevertheless, the most obvious illustration of status' wide appeal is that consensus on its importance crosses traditional paradigmatic lines in IR. It is to be expected that those scholars inclined toward constructivist or social psychological explanations would embrace status. What is more surprising—and informative—is that realists, despite their focus on

³³ Lebow 2008, 284; Lebow 2010c, 171.

³⁴ Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010a, 2010b, 2014a.

material power and force, seem equally convinced that status matters. Status, along with cognates such as “glory” and “recognition,” figured prominently in the work of the “big three”: Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thucydides.³⁵ The father of the realist paradigm, Morgenthau, argued that the desire for “social recognition” was a potent one in both domestic and international politics.³⁶ A recent summary of this stated that “all realists share a pessimistic worldview that posits perpetual struggle among groups for security, prestige and power.”³⁷ This perspective is shared, even more surprisingly, by those in the rationalist tradition, where one scholar argued that status “is important even within a strategic approach . . . since states may use it to judge quality or they may bandwagon, choosing who to support depending on what they expect others to do.”³⁸

Of course, the fact that an interest in status can be found across theoretical paradigms in IR does not inherently make the concept more useful. In this case, however, the wide variety of extant approaches to status helps in two specific ways. First, it provides *prima facie* evidence for the importance of status. That such a wide variety of approaches within political science—not to mention throughout the social and behavioral sciences—have coalesced on this concept acts as a powerful signal of its import.

More than a signal, however, each approach adds something to a broader theory of status in international relations. From strategic approaches, we are sensitized to the instrumental utility of status in IR as well as the dyadic nature of interactions in which states bargain over relative rank. From constructivist approaches, we take the focus on the social nature of status and importance of comparison groups, and from realist theories we can incorporate the complex interplay between power and status. A recent debate in political science has brought to the forefront a battle that can be (perhaps simplistically) framed as being between competing paradigms and “simplistic hypothesis testing.”³⁹ A focus on status offers us the chance to eschew both of these by providing a comprehensive theory that cuts across traditional paradigms, mining insights from across the spectrum of modern social science.

A theory of status in IR offers more even than a promise of synthesizing insights from across the various paradigmatic “schools” within the field; it

³⁵ For an overview, see Markey 1999, 2000.

³⁶ Morgenthau 1948, 73. See also Herz 1951, 1981.

³⁷ Schweller 1997, 927.

³⁸ O’Neill 2006, 1.

³⁹ Mearsheimer and Walt 2013.

also offers us the rare chance to generate a theory that has clear implications across levels of analysis. This is both unusual and valuable. Unlike many important concepts in IR, status concerns can be theorized at multiple levels of analysis rather easily. At the highest level, I follow in a long tradition of imagining the international system as characterized by multiple status hierarchies composed of shifting groups of state actors. Status is an attribute that states possess, and their rank helps to structure the relationships and interactions that take place within the system. Yet status is somewhat unique in its clear implications and relevance at lower levels of analysis. Because leaders are typically assumed to identify with the status concerns of the states they represent, we can analyze status concerns at the individual level.⁴⁰ This is in stark contrast to concepts like reputation, where there is a clear disjuncture between leader and state reputations.⁴¹ What we are left with is a theory that has clear and direct implications at levels ranging from the international to the psychological. This is a valuable attribute in theory building insofar as it aids in both scope and complexity.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT STATUS IN IR

Historically, status has enjoyed a privileged place in the study of IR, though one full of contradictions. It is consistently invoked by scholars from different “tribes” within IR (which is itself unusual enough), while at the same time eliciting either pleas for more attention or frustrated accusations that it is “ultimately, an imponderable.”⁴² It is a subject in which scholars can confidently declare that there is firm evidence for the importance of status in international politics, while in the next breath decry its neglect in theories of IR. Is status truly the “everyday currency” of international politics, or is it so elusive that we should abandon hope of ever truly understanding it?

Though status has figured prominently in foundational IR theories that are inherently wide ranging, a great deal of focus has traditionally been put on the relationship between status and war. This stems from the central importance of status in the writings of those classical or early modern political theorists who are often credited as “founding fathers” of realism, such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Thucydides. A recent reinterpretation

⁴⁰ Wohlforth 2009; Midlarsky 1975, 141.

⁴¹ Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2017.

⁴² Dore 1975, 206; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Wight 1979, 79; Gilpin 1983, 33.

of those works ascribes the prevalence of war as resulting from our “psychologically prickly” nature, which is inflamed “by even trivial slights to our glory.”⁴³

Because of—or perhaps despite—its central role in theory, status has played a prominent role in empirical studies of international conflict. The most notable idea among these works is that conflict arises from status “inconsistency,” which is a disjuncture between the status the international community attributes to an actor and the status they actually deserve.⁴⁴ Throughout this research program, attributed status was measured using the number of diplomatic representatives received whereas achieved status—what countries would feel they “deserved”—was measured as military and industrial capacity.⁴⁵

Findings in this tradition were mixed. Some found that greater inconsistencies were associated with the onset and severity of international conflict while others found either no relationship or a negative relationship between status inconsistency and war.⁴⁶ More recently, some have argued that these mixed results might be explained by temporal shifts in the relationship between status inconsistency and conflict. For example, status inconsistency might predict war in some historical periods and peace in others.⁴⁷

Despite the popularity of the idea waning over time, it is fair to say that the “abandonment of the idea may have been premature.”⁴⁸ In fact, no analysis to date has examined the complete international system over the entire span of time for which data exist. Rather, studies have focused on either a subset of states or a specific window of time. And while some studies examined the overall levels of status inconsistency in the international system and their relationship to levels of international violence, all other works examine status inconsistency for individual states. This means that we have little sense of whether the mixed results are the “fault” of the general intuition, specific theory (based on frustration and aggression, as discussed later), or the multiple and conflicting ways it has been tested. Thus, what appear in table 1.1 to be “failed” replications are

⁴³ Abizadeh 2011, 298.

⁴⁴ Galtung 1964. This notion has also been popular in other fields, and linked to outcomes as disparate as negative health outcomes and voting behavior. Jackson 1962; Lenski 1967.

⁴⁵ Singer and Small 1966.

⁴⁶ Wallace 1971, 1973; Ray 1974; East 1972.

⁴⁷ Gochman 1980; Volgy and Mayhall 1995.

⁴⁸ Werner 1999, 713.

TABLE 1.1
Previous Research on Status Inconsistency.

	Domain		Dependent variable	Independent variable	Finding
	Temporal	Spatial			
Wallace 1971 & 1973	1820–1964	“Central system” (N = 26)	Amount of conflict in system in a given year	Status inconsistency (aggregated)	Positive relationship between status inconsistency and war, lagged 15 years
Doran, Hill, and Mladenka 1979	N/A	United States, Japan, and Finland	Threat perception	Status inconsistency (individual)	Positive: in a survey of individuals from 3 nations, status “disequilibrium” was a significant predictor for feelings of threat
Midlarsky 1975	1870–1945	All states	War involvement	Mean status inconsistency (state) over 75-year period	Positive relationship between status inconsistency and war involvement
Maoz 2010	1816–2000	All states	Conflict involvement (monadic and dyadic) and amount of conflict in system in a given year	Status inconsistency (state, dyad, and system)	Positive relationship between status inconsistency and war involvement at monadic, dyadic, and system levels
Gochman 1980	1820–1970	Major powers (N = 9)	War involvement	Status inconsistency (state)	Mixed: status inconsistency associated with conflict for some states in some time periods

TABLE 1.1
Continued

	Domain		Dependent variable	Independent variable	Finding
	Temporal	Spatial			
Volgy and Mayhall 1995	1950–87	All states	Amount of conflict in system in a given year	Status inconsistency (aggregated)	Mixed: positive relationship between overall levels of status inconsistency in international system and international violence during period 1950–64, but negative relationship during period 1964–80
Ray 1974	1816–1970	European powers (N = 10)	War involvement	Status inconsistency (state)	No relationship
East 1972	1946–65	All states	Amount of conflict in system in a given year	Status inconsistency (aggregated)	Negative relationship between overall levels of status inconsistency in international system and international conflict

actually an agglomeration of different research designs, hypotheses, and subsets of data.

Thus far, much of the interest in the hierarchy of IR has focused on the ability of those at the top of the pyramid—the hegemon—to construct institutions that solidify and preserve their privileged place.⁴⁹ In the particularly important cases of power transition and hegemonic war theory, for example, status has been accorded crucial role in theory, but mostly neglected by empirical efforts. Gilpin, Organski, and Kugler have all argued for the importance of prestige as one of the central benefits denied to rising powers by the reigning hegemon, who “locks in” a hierarchy of prestige that may no longer accurately reflect the balance of capabilities.⁵⁰ Since not all rising powers desire to change the structure of the entire international system, a key question for this theory is, Which states are “satisfied” (and how can we tell)?

In these works, one observes the tendency to discuss “power,” “rank,” and “hegemony” in an expansive manner that incorporates notions of status, material capabilities, intellectual innovation, reputation, or moral authority, but to operationalize these hierarchies narrowly as direct outcomes of aggregate military capabilities or national wealth. In fact, thus far, “satisfaction” with the system has been measured through second- or third-order implications, such as similarity of alliance portfolios.⁵¹ But these measurement strategies do not truly reflect the theory suggested by power transition scholars. Revisionist intentions follow in this theory from a situation in which a rising power is denied the benefits they deserve based on their objective power and resources (because the hierarchy of benefits has been “locked in” by the current hegemon). Self-consciously focusing on status and prestige, and more important, *disentangling* them both conceptually and empirically from the others mentioned, is thus a necessity for understanding the dynamics of the international system, above and beyond any interest in individual decision making.

⁴⁹ Vayrynen 1983; Lemke and Werner 1996; Kugler and Lemke 1996.

⁵⁰ Gilpin 1983, 1988; Organski and Kugler 1980. See also Geller 1993; Lemke and Reed 1996; DiCicco and Levy 1999.

⁵¹ Signorino and Ritter 1999. This practice has been extended in recent work by Efrid, Kugler, and Genna (2003) and Lemke and Reed (1996, 1998), who have refined the measure of alliance similarity in similar attempts to infer satisfaction with the status quo. Other methods—such as diplomatic history, intuition, or informal panels of experts—are more promising but likely better suited toward smaller-scale efforts such as comparative case studies. See Wallace 1982; Geller 2000.

Related work can be found in research on the acquisition and demonstration of both conventional and nuclear weapons.⁵² On the former topic, Eyre and Suchman incorporate status into a constructivist theory based on the “highly symbolic, normative nature of militaries and their weaponry,” though they find mixed results in the empirics.⁵³ More recently, Gilady has convincingly argued that decisions to purchase aircraft carriers cannot plausibly be explained with reference to strategic necessity, and are better understood in the framework of status and symbolic significance.⁵⁴ Speaking about status and symbolic significance, Sagan invokes prestige concerns as part of his “norms and identities” model, and traces how it affected the French decision to pursue nuclear weapons and Ukrainian decision to give up its nuclear arsenal.⁵⁵

More recently, a growing literature on status in IR has drawn from Social Identity Theory (SIT).⁵⁶ In several works, Larson and colleagues have used SIT to explore strategies that great powers (particularly Russia) use to maintain and increase their status, such as by emulating the practices of higher-status groups.⁵⁷ This body of literature is particularly valuable in the attention that it focuses on social comparison.⁵⁸ Predictions are that to maintain a positive social identity, states will either emulate or compete with higher-ranked states, or otherwise reframe status achievement within a new hierarchy or based on a new dimension.⁵⁹

There is also significant research on status as a cause of war. “Prestige politics,” for example, figured prominently in Kagan’s discourse on the origin of major wars. Specifically, Kagan argued that political leaders often

⁵² O’Neill 2006.

⁵³ Though their theory incorporates the notion of status, the actual finding is a correlation between membership in intergovernmental organizations (IGO) and acquisitions of conventional weaponry. Their hypothesis was that IGO membership would have a relationship with “high-status” weapons such as supersonic aircraft, but the relationship was found to hold even with items that possessed low symbolic significance, such as armored personnel carriers and propeller aircraft. See Eyre and Suchman 1996, 86, 105–9.

⁵⁴ Gilady 2002, 2004.

⁵⁵ Sagan 1996. See also Quester 1995; Levite 2003. Prestige has also been used to help explain both Pakistan and India’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons while others have argued that the Non-Proliferation Treaty has eliminated much, if not all, the prestige previously associated with obtaining nuclear weapons. See Ahmed 1999; Perkovich 2002; Glaser 1998, 120.

⁵⁶ Tajfel 1981, 1982.

⁵⁷ Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010b.

⁵⁸ Clunan 2014.

⁵⁹ Larson and Shevchenko 2010b, 67.

see prestige as a critical interest worth fighting to preserve.⁶⁰ Lebow has proposed a grand theory of motives for war in which he finds—based on his codings of wars from 1648 onward—that desire for greater *standing* accounts for over half of all international conflict.⁶¹ In a similar vein, Wohlforth has proposed a theory of great power status competition that predicts more “status conflict” (wars whose motivating factor is competing for primacy in the status hierarchy) in multipolar than in bipolar or unipolar systems.⁶² Related work has focused on the dynamics of status recognition, anxiety, and immobility.⁶³

Finally, status has been the focus of recent experimental work on the decisions of political and military leaders, and an analysis of how states balance the trade-offs involved in seeking both status and power through formal military alliances.⁶⁴ These and other studies enumerated here represent a shift toward more detailed examinations of how status operates in world politics.⁶⁵

Four Pathologies

Where does this leave us? Although the efforts I described represent a useful beginning, we are on less than solid ground. A survey of the literature reveals four pathologies common to theories of status in IR.⁶⁶ While these issues are likely a sign of the relative “youth” of status research in IR, that is all the more reason to shine a light on them in hopes of furthering the research agenda in the years to come.

The first is IR’s collective fixation on major powers. There are, naturally, reasons to focus on the most important states in the system. Most previous research on status, however, has excluded smaller states. In some cases, such exclusions have resulted from the limitations of data or computing power (earlier quantitative work on status inconsistency falls into this category). In

⁶⁰ Kagan 1995.

⁶¹ Lebow 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c.

⁶² Wohlforth 2009.

⁶³ Greenhill 2008; Wolf 2011a; Murray 2012; Onea 2014; Ward 2015.

⁶⁴ Renshon 2015; Renshon and Warren 2015.

⁶⁵ See also a small but growing literature on the determinants of status. Neumayer 2008; Kinne 2014.

⁶⁶ A less common problem is that of hyperbole. For example, even those sympathetic to the general argument might be skeptical of the notion that status was the dominant motive in 58 percent of wars, while security concerns account for only 18 percent. Lebow 2010c, 127.

many cases, the scope is narrowed implicitly by utilizing a research design (such as measuring status seeking via purchases of aircraft carriers) that selectively includes wealthier and more powerful countries. In other cases, scholars simply argued that status did not matter as much to lower-ranked powers.⁶⁷ Early research on status in IR, for example, simply argued that only “central” powers would be affected by status concerns.⁶⁸

Of course, some theoretical mechanisms might be different for major powers, as Wohlforth argues is the case.⁶⁹ The overall result, however, is the same: an overemphasis on major powers at the expense of all other states in the system. This pattern has begun to shift slowly in recent years, with works examining regional powers (such as China and Russia) or even “small states” such as Norway, but the overall emphasis in the literature remains unaltered.⁷⁰ Major powers *are* important, perhaps even disproportionately so. But by focusing nearly exclusively on great powers, scholars have skipped the critical step of theorizing how status concerns work on a more general level that is common to all actors.

A second pathology concerns the general reluctance to incorporate insights on status from related fields, such as economics, psychology, and biology. In addition to a basic case for the importance of status and reputation, research in other fields provides a viable source for the generation of new hypotheses or answers to empirical puzzles that are observed in IR. Too often, theories of status start and stop with the notion that states (or leaders) pursue status, but fail to address critical related questions such as: *When* does status matter most? *How* are status comparisons made? Of course, there are exceptions that have helped propel status research forward by drawing on sociology or economics, but these are not yet the norm.⁷¹

Of course, it’s not advisable to simply pluck answers from other fields and insert them into the context of world politics; it is not always obvious how research on status in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies or chimpanzee hierarchies relates to world politics. Yet there is a substantial amount of untapped (from the perspective of political science) work on status from the field of psychology and behavioral economics that may

⁶⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁸ Wallace 1971, 24. See also Gochman 1980; Gilpin 1983.

⁶⁹ Wohlforth 2009.

⁷⁰ On regional powers, see Cline et al. 2011. On smaller states’ status concerns, see Neumann and de Carvalho 2015.

⁷¹ See Gilady 2002; Pu and Schweller 2014.

prove useful in cases like this. For example, Frank's observation that "status is local" suggests something about the nature of comparisons that might be applicable to international politics.⁷² Perhaps states make "targeted" comparisons to specific reference groups rather than simply compare themselves with the population of states as a whole. These reference groups might be formed by common history, shared culture, strategic interests, religion, and so on.

Even when political scientists have learned from other fields, we have oftentimes generated new problems. A third pathology concerns the difficulty in constructing IR theories using models and assumptions—borrowed from other areas of research—that are difficult to translate into the realm of world politics. IR research on status that is based on the foundational assumptions of SIT is but one example of this. Work in this tradition has been focused and useful, but its predictions have proven difficult to test systematically in IR. For example, experimental findings on social comparison and "which of many possible identity-maintenance strategies they [states] will choose" have been difficult to operationalize in the context of world politics.⁷³ Other recent work has suggested that IR scholars have misinterpreted the traditional distinction in SIT between *individual* and *collective* responses to status frustration as well as potentially overlooked novel identity-maintenance strategies that may be unique to the political domain.⁷⁴ While it is unfair to criticize social identity theorists for some of these issues—it would be unusual for a paradigm to *not* generate some controversy or have drawbacks—it does help make the case for a "bigger tent" in status research moving forward.

The final pathology concerns the tendency to see status seeking as, well, pathological. More specifically, it is the noted tendency of IR scholars to view status-related behaviors as irrational or noninstrumental.⁷⁵ A typical example is Abizadeh, who sees status as central to the origins of war, but only because of our "fragile, fearful, impressionable" natures that are easily subject to "manipulation" and can "become irrationally inflamed by even trivial slights to our glory."⁷⁶ Of course, status-seeking or status motives may in some cases be nonrational, but relying on this assumption has

⁷² Frank 1985. See also Heffetz and Frank 2011.

⁷³ Wohlforth 2009, 36.

⁷⁴ Ward 2015.

⁷⁵ For example, Eyre and Suchman 1996; Gilady 2002, 2004.

⁷⁶ Abizadeh 2011, 298.

all but blinded us to the strategic rationales for acquiring status.⁷⁷ This is problematic insofar as it has created a separation between research on status and the dominant rationalist paradigms in political science. This siloing off of status has been to the detriment of both “sides,” because status research should take the strategic logic of status seeking more seriously, while rationalist-flavored IR theories that already invoke status concerns should do more to integrate these concepts into their empirical work.

THIS BOOK’S CONTRIBUTION

My earlier review of the state of status research can be summed up by noting the general agreement among policy makers and scholars concerning the importance of status. This agreement is balanced by the pathologies I noted as well as several outstanding issues. Specifically:

1. We lack a full understanding of what factors make status more or less salient to political leaders or states.
2. Despite its popularity, we have relatively few overarching theories to guide us in understanding how status works in world politics, and how it might be connected to international conflict and cooperation.
3. The perceptual nature of status has precluded its direct measurement.
4. There is little evidence for a *causal* link between status and traditional IR outcomes (such as conflict behavior or incidence).

This book innovates on all these fronts. First, my theory gains traction on the issue of what factors make status concerns more or less relevant for leaders by switching focus to status concerns that vary systematically and are generated within “status communities” of peer competitors. While previous work has noted that status is relative, it has failed to ask: Relative to *whom*? Instead, most other research has assumed a competition of all against all, setting up difficult-to-imagine status contests between, for example, Mongolia and the United Kingdom. Thus, one notable advancement of my theory is its treatment of these *reference groups*, long cited as one of the key elements of status by virtually every other field in the social sciences, but severely neglected in IR.⁷⁸ This also helps to address what I earlier

⁷⁷ O’Neill 2006.

⁷⁸ As always, there are exceptions that focus on some sort of targeted comparison, such as regional power competition, but these are not the norm.

described as the “collective fixation” on major powers: since all states compete with groups of (relevant) peer competitors, status concerns are no longer confined to the most powerful states.

Second, my theory of status dissatisfaction provides a comprehensive explanation for how status is linked to international conflict. States seek status commensurate with their abilities because it is a valuable resource for coordinating expectations of dominance and deference in strategic interactions. And rather than an instinctual, frustrated response following a “failed bid for status,” the initiation of conflict is better conceptualized as one way for states to alter the beliefs of other members of the international community. Previous theories have relied on “frustration” or unthinking aggression, presupposing a degree of irrationality that is both difficult to prove and misleading. Moreover, such assumptions underemphasize the *strategic nature of status seeking* in world politics that is consistent with both psychological and rationalist accounts of IR.

Third, I noted that the perceptual nature of status has largely precluded its direct measurement. This book contributes on this front through innovative large-*N* measurement strategies as well as by triangulating status and status concerns through multiple methods. Status concerns, for example, are measured using leader statements and writings in the case studies; experimental manipulations in the lab and survey experiments; and status “deficits” (divergences between status accorded a state and what they deserve) in the large-*N* chapters. All three methods provide valuable leverage; experimentally, we are able to *directly manipulate* the status concerns of our subjects. In the cross-national section, I improve on the traditional method of status measurement, which typically involves counting the number of diplomats hosted (the more diplomats a country receives, the higher their status ranking). I use cutting-edge network analysis methods to incorporate two key facts about status: that actors gain more from associations with higher- rather than lower-status actors, and that actors compete not against all other states in the system but rather against local “reference groups” composed of peer competitors. These large-*N* measures of status are supplemented and cross-validated using process tracing in several case studies that show the influence of heightened status concerns on foreign policy decision making.

Finally, I have noted that the methods employed thus far have made it difficult to assess the *causal* importance of status in world politics. Previous research designs have generated associations in large data sets that may be driven by omitted variables or case studies in which we must take the

potentially “cheap” talk of leaders as gospel. While careful statistical and case study research can address the influence of potential confounders—and this book does both—it is simply not enough on its own. Given the importance of the subject, we must utilize all the tools we have at our disposal, including experimental methods, which have significant advantages in detecting causal relationships and testing hypotheses related to causal mechanisms. This book addresses this shortcoming through the use of several experiments designed to test hypotheses about status and political decision making at the micro level. In doing so, I present the first experimental evidence on the effects of status concerns, using subject groups composed of high-level political and military leaders along with a laboratory experiment that relies on real financial incentives and is framed around a narrative of war and peace.

STATUS DISSATISFACTION

Status dissatisfaction is a state-level theory. The primary actors are states, and it is *attributes of the state*—its level of status concern and the composition of its status community—that are the primary explanatory factors. To the extent that leaders enter into the theory, their status concerns are assumed to mirror those of the state. Though the theory sketches out microfoundations at the individual level, the overall theory is not one of leaders’ decision making. Leaders, in the broader theory, are endogenous to the status concerns of the state, and their individual-level attributes—for example, whether they served in the military or came into power through “irregular means”—are irrelevant.

Status in international politics is *standing or rank in a status community*. It is positional (relative, not absolute, values are most salient), perceptual (based on beliefs), and social (the beliefs that matter are those higher-order, collective beliefs about where a given actor “stands” relative to others). While status most often refers to rank in a hierarchy, in some cases it may be used to discuss an identity (“status as . . .”), in which case it might be thought of as something akin to a club good. Even in those cases, positionality is critical.

The first way in which status dissatisfaction departs from previous work is in its motivating puzzle. In a review of status as a motive for war, my colleagues and I noted: “If there is one feature of . . . status that scholars are in agreement upon, it is that leaders, policy elites, and national populations

are often concerned, even obsessed, with their status.”⁷⁹ Despite this agreement, many theories begin with the puzzle, “Does status matter”, or “Do leaders care about status?” But these questions and their answers do not provide much in the way of inferential leverage. Even if we stipulate that status matters, or that states or leaders care about their position in a hierarchy, or all prefer higher rather than lower status, all we have done is—in the language of statistics—added a constant to our model. If we seek to understand something that varies, and we do here, then this can only be a first step. This suggests an important move in our theory building: we must first focus on variation in preferences for status. To do so, I propose a focus on status *concerns*. And if our focus is on variation in concern for status, we are best served by theorizing the systematic and predictable ways in which heightened concerns are triggered.

One of the first things we learn about status—even in this book—is that it is positional, and that relative amounts matter. But relative to *whom*? Earlier works on status in IR have tended to either ignore this question, focus exclusively on the hierarchy composed of major powers, or place all states in a de facto global hierarchy. None of these solutions are optimal, and the latter is acceptable only if we believe the global hierarchy to be the most salient community for all states. Given the difficulty of imagining small island nations in the Pacific focused on a status competition with the United Kingdom—and following recent work throughout the social sciences on the importance of reference groups—I propose a new rule of thumb: even internationally, status is local.

Thus, the oft-cited maxim that status is “positional” is true but incomplete. Status is positional, but for that to mean anything, we need to know something about the “status community” to which the actor belongs: the reference group that actors see themselves as belonging to and competing against. In theory, actors can compare their status to a multitude of targets along an almost-infinite array of dimensions, but in practice the most important comparisons will be along dimensions that are salient aspects of national identity (for example, region, major power status, or religion). This has important implications for our research design and theory: status communities will be more salient as the number or importance of shared attributes increases. Thus, my innovation is to identify status communities *other than the global system* that are relevant to states. I operationalize this broadly in two ways. The first, deductive approach constructs status

⁷⁹ Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 381.

communities that are based on attributes of states that are widely viewed as important, such as geographic region. The second approach is inductive and uses the foreign policy choices of states—primarily their diplomatic, trade, and alliance partners—to sort them into groups of peer competitors. This latter approach also allows those groups to evolve over time as states move up (or down) and out of different reference groups.

Given proper boundary conditions—the composition of the “status community”—for the status concerns of states, the next step is to identify how those concerns might vary systematically. I propose that status concerns will be heightened when actors believe they are being accorded lower status than they deserve. This then requires an account of how some actor, *i*, develops beliefs about how much status they deserve. My theory of status dissatisfaction focuses on the critical role of expectations that underlie many of the most important comparisons that we make.⁸⁰ Evidence from the individual level is corroborated by scholarship in IR, such as power transition theory, in which conflict results from an aspiring hegemon being denied the benefits that they expect. This literature also provides one helpful way of proxying expectations in the domain of international politics: “asset levels” of other attributes, such as power or economic capacity.

We now have an account of who states compete against (status communities), when status concerns are likely to be triggered (when status < expectations), and where actors’ expectations about their own status comes from (asset levels of other important attributes, such as military power). But what happens when those status concerns are triggered—when states are dissatisfied with their status position? Research on the related topic of “status inconsistency” has coalesced around an answer: states dissatisfied with their status, desirous of shifting their position in a hierarchy, might try and fail to change that position—how exactly is not specified—and after failing to gain status, “engage in conflict and violence.”⁸¹

In this formulation, states that are dissatisfied resort to violence only *after* failing to change the status quo—that is, out of frustration. But positing that states act out of “frustration” or “anger” presents two serious problems. First, it is a rather weak mechanism by which status might be linked to war. It presupposes an irrationality (acting out of frustration rather than

⁸⁰ Friedman 1957; Novemsky and Kahneman 2005; Koszegi and Rabin 2006.

⁸¹ Volgy and Mayhall 1995, 68. See also Gochman (1980 10, 119), where he speaks of states “venting” their “frustrations.” On the role of “negative feelings” and “anger” as mechanisms, see Midlarsky 1975, 110.

strategic interests) that obscures the more likely way that status concerns might relate to conflict: because states can expect to profit from higher status and because status is positional (and thus other states can be expected to be reluctant to cede status voluntarily), violence may be one way of *achieving* higher status as opposed to a last resort after having failed to do so. Second, it attributes individual-level emotional states (“frustration” and “anger”) to state actors, confusing the levels of analysis even further while also playing a role in de-emphasizing the strategic rationale for violence I described earlier.

In contrast to previous explanations, I propose a new way forward based on an understanding of how status operates in international politics. Because an actor’s status position is based on the collective beliefs of their community, states seeking to change their status position must alter others’ *beliefs*. Not all interactions, however, are capable of affecting beliefs about status. Because status is a perceptual construct, our cognitive limitations affect the ease with which we can move up or down in a hierarchy. Chief among these restrictions is that beliefs are updated sporadically—not continuously—and then only in response to large events. Rather than continuously updating their beliefs in response to every interaction, large or small, actors change their beliefs only when they are “hit over the head,” or “shaken and shattered into doing so.”⁸²

Because beliefs about status require some consensus in the international community, there are three requirements for a “status-altering event.” First, it must be highly visible (i.e., public). This is because status is based on collective beliefs: events that change perceptions of status must be visible to all potential observers. The second requirement—that the event be dramatic or highly salient—is implied by the basis of status in collective beliefs. Because political leaders and their advisers face severe constraints on their time and attention, they cannot pay attention to everything that happens in the world. Dramatic events, in which lives are lost, for instance, are more likely to be able to compete for the attention of multiple actors in the system. Finally, because status requires a shared consensus on a given state’s “standing” in the relevant community, the event must convey unambiguous information. Taking these conditions into account, status dissatisfaction theory predicts that states are likely to initiate violent military conflicts to shift beliefs about where they stand in a given hierarchy.

⁸² Shleifer 2000, 113; Stoessinger 1981, 240.

In the chapters that follow, I elucidate the theory in further detail and begin the process of amassing evidence. In providing evidence, it has become common for scholars to either incorporate additional levels of analysis or different methodologies. This book does both by combining state-level data (in a cross-national research design) with qualitative and historical accounts as well as experiments. In the experimental components of the book, the focus shifts so that the primary actors are individuals. While the theory of status dissatisfaction is a theory of state behavior, I use experimental methods to test the second-order implications of the broader theory at another level of analysis.

In fact, the rationale for the focus on the individual level is much the same as the rationale for incorporating qualitative/historical research and experiments into the project. First, both help me investigate a potential mechanism suggested by status dissatisfaction: if the theory is right, status concerns should vary systematically, and when triggered, cause individuals to increase their value for status. Put simply, once an actor's status is threatened, or once they decide a situation requires defending or increasing their status, they should be willing to pay far more to keep x amount of status than they would be had those concerns not been triggered.⁸³ This suggests that once status is threatened for leaders, they will become increasingly willing to expend resources to save it. This, in turn, suggests that status concerns should have strong implications for a class of decisions related to the escalation of commitment.

Status dissatisfaction theory predicts a greater tendency to “throw good money after bad” once status concerns are heightened. Note that this is *not* “sunk costs bias,” which implies cognitive bias or errors in judgment. Without information on the value of the status sought by the actor, we have no way of knowing whether the increased expenditure of resources represents biased judgment or a sound investment. We know only that such behavior is more likely when status concerns are triggered. This hypothesis, a “microfoundation” of status dissatisfaction theory, is best suited to verification in the controlled environment of a lab experiment, but also provides implications that are testable in the qualitative record.

In principle, one could imagine this being examined with quantitative data sets in a cross-national design, but in practice the available data (even, for example, the LEAD data set) do not address the objects of interest in

⁸³ Pettit, Yong, and Spataro 2010.

this theory.⁸⁴ Because the mechanism I referenced that links status concerns to conflict is inherently psychological in nature—remember, psychological does not mean “not strategic”—qualitative and experimental methods are uniquely suited to providing evidence that helps us to evaluate the overall theory.

In addition to helping assess potential mechanisms, a research design that incorporates both experimental and qualitative methods makes it easier to establish and validate the *causal* effects of status concerns. It’s obvious how experiments do so, given that their defining feature is the random assignment of experimental treatments that (if the study is properly designed) rule out confounders. Qualitative research helps in much the same way. For example, it’s important to establish that heightened status concerns lead to conflict initiation rather than the other way around. In cross-national designs, we can address this in some ways (for example, by lagging the independent variable), but without fully ruling out alternative causal paths. Chapter 6—along with the illustrative cases in chapter 7—help to corroborate this basic causal chain by showing that Germany’s status concerns originated before the strategy of conflict initiation versus as a result of it. Such investigations also aid us in establishing important assumptions of the theory, such as the notion that leaders will be aware of, care about, and respond to shifts in the status of their country as distinct from their own personal status.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2, “Status Dissatisfaction,” outlines my theory of status dissatisfaction by providing answers to basic questions surrounding status in world politics (for example, what types of status are most important? What strategies do states use to maximize or salvage their status?), and clarifying the relationship between status and conflict. In place of the traditional focus on status seeking or preferences for status, I examine status *concerns* that vary over time and context. This is critical because while preferences for higher status can be taken as a constant, the level of concern over relative status is not. Building on this fact provides far greater analytic leverage in examining the effects of status in world politics than previous approaches have been able to offer.

⁸⁴ Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015.

Status dissatisfaction theory provides a comprehensive explanation for how status is linked to international conflict, beginning with the critical issue of how states make status comparisons. In particular, it focuses on how states sort themselves into “status communities” of peer competitors. Thus, one notable advancement of this theory is its treatment of these reference groups, long cited as one of the key elements of status by virtually every other field in the social sciences, but mostly neglected in IR. Finally, the theory provides an explicit link between status dissatisfaction—a heightened concern for status triggered by status deficits within a given status community—and conflict. Previous theories have relied on “frustration” or unthinking aggression, underemphasizing the strategic nature of status seeking in world politics. States seek status commensurate with their abilities because it is a valuable resource for coordinating expectations of dominance and deference in strategic interactions. And rather than an instinctual, frustrated response following a *failed bid for status*, the initiation of conflict is better conceptualized as one way in which states seek to alter the beliefs of other members of the international community.

Three major concerns emerge in chapter 2. First, there is no empirical support for a *causal* link between status concerns and outcomes related to international conflict: the associations found in qualitative and large-*N* work cannot rule out the influence of unobserved variables, which impact both the likelihood of war and the measure that is often used as a proxy for status—diplomatic representation. Second, the social and perceptual nature of status has precluded both precise and direct measurement, leading to a reliance on proxies such as diplomatic representation and success in the Olympics. Finally, we have scant information on what factors make status concerns more or less salient to political leaders.

In chapter 3, “Losing Face and Sinking Costs,” I use experimental methods to test the behavioral microfoundations of status dissatisfaction theory, focusing on the three gaps in our understanding enumerated above. In particular, I use two simultaneously fielded experiments to provide direct evidence on the foundational tenets of status dissatisfaction theory: that status concerns vary predictably in response to contextual and dispositional factors, and that once triggered, those concerns raise the value that actors are willing to pay for increased status. The chapter also provides and tests additional mechanisms that link status concerns to international conflict through individuals’ willingness to escalate their commitment to a failing course of action. In our observational data, a common issue is that

status concerns might sneak their way into “both sides” of our equations, making any effect of status concerns difficult to disentangle. In these experimental studies, I prime status concerns irrelevant to the decision process that subjects are engaged in, helping me to cleanly isolate the effect of status concerns while also providing what is likely to be a lower bound on the effects of status in political decision making.

In study 1, I replicate and extend a well-known sunk costs experiment that asks subjects to make a hypothetical investment decision. In study 2, I introduce a newly developed experimental paradigm—the “Island Game”—to provide a behavioral measure of escalation, using real financial incentives, and framed around a narrative of war and peace. Study 2 utilizes a unique sample of political and military leaders from the Senior Executive Fellows (SEF) program at the Harvard Kennedy Schools as well as a group of demographically matched control subjects to address common concerns about external validity in IR experiments. This chapter also begins the work of investigating other factors that might exacerbate status concerns, particularly social dominance orientation (SDO) and power. I find that individuals high in SDO—that is, subjects with stronger preferences for hierarchy—are most affected by status concerns and correspondingly more likely to exhibit patterns of biased escalation. And while the fear of losing status impedes decision making and increases the tendency to “throw good money after bad,” power aids decision making by buffering high-power subjects against the worst effects of status loss.

Chapter 4, “A Network Approach to Status,” tackles the challenge of how we should think about and measure status in the realm of international politics. Directly addressing the role of status in international conflict requires wading into the messy world of observational data, whether quantitative (in this chapter) or qualitative (in the last two chapters). Doing so requires us tackling thorny issues of measurement. This issue is even more pressing when the concept of interest (status) is both perceptual and social.

In this chapter, I describe how we can use the tools of network analysis to sensibly infer international status rankings. I innovate by incorporating universally acknowledged aspects of status that have thus far been ignored, including the notion that status is more efficiently gained from higher (rather than lower) status actors. And while diplomatic exchange data are often used—in one form or another—to examine international status, I provide the first ever cross-validation of the data, using a combination of alternative data sources and historical research. In doing so,

I provide insight into the sources of status. I find that there are many “paths to status” in world politics; states can manipulate their international standing through both normatively good and bad actions such as greater international engagement and nuclear proliferation. Finally, I use cutting-edge “community detection” techniques to operationalize *local* reference groups. This allows us—for the first time—to directly measure states’ reference groups, the “status communities” to which they belong, using data on the nature and intensity of diplomatic representation.

Chapter 5, “Status Deficits and War,” provides empirical evidence drawn from a large- N statistical analysis of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and international conflict at several degrees of intensity (ranging from crises to interstate war). First, I examine a direct implication of my theory: Does conflict serve as a status-altering event? In fact, no matter how one measures it, victory in conflict pays status dividends. This is true whether a state initiates or is targeted, whether the comparison category is losing, drawing, or not being involved in conflict at all, and holds across time periods, regime type, and size of state. I then turn to the link between status deficits and conflict initiation, and find that controlling for other important factors, states that are attributed less status than they are due based on material capabilities are overwhelmingly more likely (than “satisfied” states) to initiate militarized disputes at every level of intensity.

This chapter also presents unique data on which comparisons are most salient in motivating international conflict (for example, Who do powerful states compare themselves to? Are South Africa and the United States likely to compare themselves to similar groups of countries?). I show that the types of comparisons that are made—who the “reference group” is—have important implications for how status concerns are manifested in international politics. In addition to making war more likely, dissatisfaction over status changes the very nature of conflict. I show that dissatisfied states choose different targets than otherwise-similar but “satisfied” states. In particular, they disproportionately select into conflicts against lower-power but higher-status states.

In examining the impact of status deficits on international conflict, I also consider several potential objections. First, I show that far from being a “remnant of the nineteenth century,” the impact of status deficits on war does not change significantly over time. Another potential objection revolves around the notion of norms that may have developed over time in some status communities, prohibiting the use of violence to attain greater international standing. I show that even among communities

with extremely low absolute levels of violence, status deficits predict the initiation of conflict.

While the quantitative chapters carry important advantages, their primary drawback is the possibility that the statistical associations found might be spurious, driven by endogeneity stemming from either measurement error or omitted variables. While careful statistical modeling can address some of these concerns, the addition of carefully selected case studies helps protect against spurious correlations, provides insight into causal mechanisms, and helps to tease out further implications of the theory not observed in the cross-national data.

In chapter 6, “‘Petty Prestige Victories’ and *Weltpolitik* in Germany,” I unpack the “black box” of the state by investigating whether and how status concerns motivated German decision making during the years, 1897–1911. Seen in light of my status dissatisfaction theory, Germany’s “world policy,” often derided by historians as blundering or reckless, is cast a new. German leaders, driven by the strong belief that they weren’t accorded the status they deserved, formulated a grand strategy intended to raise their international profile through the instigation of major and minor international crises designed to coerce status concessions from Britain, France, and Russia. I demonstrate that the policies associated with *Weltpolitik*—primarily the constant initiation of international crises, and pursuit of a large navy and mostly worthless colonial territories—may instead be seen as policies designed to coerce other states into ceding status to Germany. This chapter both fleshes out the empirical results from the laboratory and large-*N* chapters while shedding light on the long-term origins of World War I.

Despite the strong evidence on the importance of status concerns in Wilhelmine foreign policy, several open questions remain relating to the generalizability of status dissatisfaction theory. To that end, this last empirical chapter, “Salvaging Status: Doubling Down in Russia, Egypt, and Great Britain,” examines three separate sets of decisions:

1. Russia’s decision to aggressively back Serbia in the 1914 July Crisis
2. Britain’s decision to collude with Israel and France in launching the 1956 Suez War
3. Gamal Abdel Nasser’s 1962 decision to intervene in the Yemen Civil War (and continue to escalate through the rest of the decade)

I broadly corroborate the patterns found in the *Weltpolitik* case while highlighting the plausibility of several new mechanisms. These cases also

help to make the critical point that status concerns are not confined to European countries, great powers, or states in the pre–World War I era. No single system of government, culture, or people has a monopoly on status concerns and the link between sharpened status concerns, and international conflict is robust. And where Wilhelmine Germany’s status concerns led to a policy of aggressive conflict initiation and brinkmanship, the minicases examined here show the other side of status concerns: state behavior designed to salvage or defend status rather than increase it.