Instagram Is For Prostitutes And Mentally Ill Narcissists

- Silicon Valley exploits the sick to profit off of false hopes

Two decades before he landed in Australia, Captain James Cook was at sea facing a desperate matter of life and death. The problem was scurvy, a deadly illness caused by Vitamin C deficiency and which had been the curse of sailors for centuries.

By the time that Capt Cook set sail for the South Pacific in 1769 he had grown confident in a remedy, the only problem being that it was sauerkraut – never a particularly popular meal in England, and at a time when vegetables were looked down upon. How to convince the crew to eat 7,860 lbs of fermented cabbage on their long journey east? Cook simply ordered it to be a served only at the Captain's Table, not to the men. As he noted in his journal: "The moment they see their superiors set a value upon it, it becomes the finest stuff in the world." "Sure enough, the lower ranked players began requesting it," Will Storr writes in his [excellent new book, *The Status Game.*](#) "Before long, sauerkraut had to be rationed. The number of men that died from scurvy on that expedition was a record-breaking zero."

The battle for status has defined human history; in the form of *kleos* or "glory" it provides the impetus for Homer's heroes; it has been the subject of countless works of English literature; and the inspiration for absurd fashions from codpieces to ruffs to unwearable high heels. More recently, as status markers like accents or dress have levelled, and traditional barriers to social climbing (or abseiling) reduced, so the ways of signalling status

have become more nuanced. And in some ways more competitive and vicious.

Life is a status game, and Storr identifies three methods by which we reach the top: dominance, competence and virtue (although most people use a combination of two or all three). It is the last of these which is the most interesting, and sometimes the most dangerous, inspiring immense cruelty.

Status is extremely important to wellbeing, so much so that it can have a profound effect on our health. People more successful in their careers tend to live longer, even taking into account confounders like smoking. The demoralising feeling of lower social status can send our bodies into a sort of crisis mode which in the long term puts us at higher risk of neurodegenerative disease, heart disease and cancer.

Being a loser can be fatal, and people who feel low status are also more likely to become ungenerous towards others and pick up destructive personal habits such as eating more sugary food — unsurprisingly, being overweight is an obvious status signal in rich countries. They are also more likely to kill themselves, with loss of job or divorce being the biggest risk factors for male suicide in middle age, for men who find themselves no longer provider or patriarch. Some people find the status game so stressful they simply drop out, most notoriously in Japan where more than half a million *hikikomori* have "social withdrawal syndrome", locked in their bedroom doing God-knows-what.

Such is the beneficial effect of high status that most workers would choose a fancier title over a pay rise; in comparison having more power does not equal a happier life, heavy being

the head that wears the crown. Our lust for status, in contrast, is insatiable.

When a high-status individual does something, Storr writes, "our subconscious *copy-flatter-conform*programming is triggered and we allow them to alter our beliefs and behaviour... We mimic not just their behaviour but their beliefs. The better we believe, the higher we rise. And so faith, not truth, is incentivised. People will believe almost anything if high-status people – whether priests, generals, actors, musicians, TikTokkers – suggest them." Indeed they will profess to believe quite obviously untrue things.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, a huge amount of effort goes into signalling and detecting. "High-status people tend to speak more often and more loudly," he notes, and "are perceived to be more facially expressive; achieve more successful interruptions in conversation; stand closer to us; touch themselves less; use more relaxed, open postures; use more 'filled pauses' such as 'um' and 'ah' and have a steadier vocal tone". In fact our voice tone and even the frequency of our voice – the hum – changes to match the higher-status people. I've known workplaces where people come to imitate the laugh of the boss; you could hear them howling together, vocally members of the same tribe.

These signals dominate office and corporate life. A friend who works in finance recounted how Zoom conferences were far more exhausting because in real-life meetings you can easily tell from body language who was important, and mentally zone out when low-status clients started babbling away.

The human need for status can be hugely beneficial. Visit any major art gallery and you will see the result of this intense competition in late medieval Italy, where rival families hired the

greatest artists and architects to raise their status. In 18th century Britain, membership of clubs and societies became a social marker, the result being that the number of learned societies rose from 50 in 1750 to 1,500 in 1850, with an enormous impact on education levels, wealth and a variety of other measures.

Another example he cites is British cooking, which improved from the 1980s with the rising prestige associated with leading chefs, influenced by the very alpha male Marco Pierre White. (It is worth noting that, where something is low status, it will often be female-dominated because men place huge emphasis on employment status: whereas the traditional English male chauvinist believed that women belonged in the kitchen, his French equivalent saw it as the exclusive domain of the all-male culinary art.)

But just as often status games can be toxic, and do dreadful things to people — especially if religion, politics or some other marker of identity are involved.

I've long believed that political beliefs work as status-markers, and have become more so in recent decades as other signals have declined in importance. People will adopt positions not just out of sincerity, partisan loyalty or conformity, but because they signal social status. Crime and immigration are the most obvious examples, because liberal positions are associated with higher education levels. Low-status members of society are less likely to benefit from freedom of movement, and more likely to be victims of crime. At best these views are vulgar.

This can have perverse results, the most visible example being with architecture. Post-war architecture is almost universally loathed, which is why [pre-20th century buildings consistently sell for more](), even though they have huge technological disadvantages. Polling shows [that a dislike of modernist]() architecture [is one of the few things]() that [every demographic agrees on]() – black, white and Asian, male and female, rich and poor, young and old. [They all prefer the vernacular style.]()

The one section of society which disagrees happens to be architecture students — [and the longer someone has been studying architecture, the more pro-modernist their views.]() That suggests an opinion which has become a status signal, marking the sophisticate out from the *hoi polloi* who share Prince Charles's love of "pastiche". If the public suddenly decided they actually liked the stuff that wins architecture awards, the high-status people would all be trying to build the new Poundbury.

That may be just my cynicism, but humans will repeat untruths if they feel it helps their position, and Storr cites various social science experiments showing that participants will make statements which they know to be false if other, high-status "participants" (actually actors) say it first. Worse still, "those asked publicly not only endorsed the false majority view, they punished the sole teller of truth by down-grading them." If you're ever mobbed on social media for a bad opinion, it might be of some comfort to know that a lot of the people throwing stones will secretly agree with you. Or perhaps it won't.

To some extent all societal debates are in part a status competition, especially with regards the modern quest for moral status. Although dominance games are behind a great deal of

violence across the animal kingdom, humans have evolved to live in far larger groups than other great apes and have therefore become much less violent. Instead, we we have learned to use virtue to raise our status, a quality which shows commitment to the wider community.

Unsurprisingly, it has been the strategy of choice for manipulative bullies since time immemorial, with virtue games inspiring some of the most appalling cruelty in history, ranging from the witch hunts of the 17th century to the ritual child abuse panics of the 1980s.

Those responsible for these atrocities played a virtue game, creating the narrative that they were fighting some all-powerful, evil enemy, with the "maintenance of conformity, correct beliefs and behaviours being of heightened importance."

The same process is clearly at work behind social media-led bullying, These are always framed in terms of protecting the weak, the urge to care and protect from harm; the more people imagine themselves aiding the vulnerable, the more horrendous their behaviour, giving them free rein to commit what Jonathan Sacks called "altruistic evil". People do terrible things more out of love than out of hate. But it is also a status game, the aim being to "seek the maximal removal" of their opponent's status: "ideally, reputational death."

"When their mob grows into a status goldrush, a massive blast of vindictive energy gets directed at the victim. Attracted by the prizes, more and more ambitious players pile in and the game becomes an animal of attack, glorying in the ecstasy of dominance."

This is all especially dangerous because status is important not just to individuals but to groups, too, and many people feel that collective success and failure intensely. When a group is on top, its people feel happier; Storr cites a study tracking language across millions of books and newspaper articles which suggests that the British were most content in the 1880s. I don't find this implausible: despite the huge amounts of poverty and early death relative to today, it was around the period when "to be born an Englishman was to win first prize in the lottery of life".

Modern-day identity politics is dangerous because it unleashes a competition for status that can never really end. Many idealists hope to make the world fairer by raising the status of one group, often by increasing the prestige of their ancestors through historical reinterpretation. Yet status is a zero-sum game, and unlike wealth the pie cannot be expanded: if your group rises in status, others must fall, and the psychological and even physical effects of losing status are real.

Most of humanity's problems have to some extent been solved or alleviated by technology and progress; we have never been richer, healthier or more at peace. But desire for status is the one thing that can never be overcome, because it is not enough that I succeed — others must fail.