“Middle class” won a sizable majority, and if we collapse lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle into a generic middle, we do indeed get Keller’s “overwhelming majority” of 86 percent identifying as some version of middle class. Perhaps this is the result underlying the urban myth, but it has been holding on, evidence-free, for an average pollster’s lifetime. After 1939, Gallup and every other survey started tinkering, and pollsters soon agreed that “working class” sounded better than “lower-middle class,” so that term was never used again (see figure 1.2). One thing remains constant: Americans rarely call themselves “rich” or “poor” and are reluctant to place themselves at the unqualified upper or lower extremes.\(^\text{10}\)

If in fact we have not been democratically middle class since early last century, how do we decide where we belong? In researching their essay collection, Class Matters, New York Times writers finally settled the class hand we’re dealt as including four suits: income, wealth, education, and occupation.\(^\text{11}\) As Times writers Janny Scott and David Leonhardt put it, face cards in three suits can land you in the upper-middle class, just as 2s and 3s in several suits can demote you, so no one suit is necessary and sufficient.\(^\text{12}\) Family income is the most important factor in our sense of social class, with occupation close behind, according to Hout’s data and going back to the earliest surveys.\(^\text{13}\) Because we decide what class we are based on income and occupation, we are just as likely to identify as “working class” as “middle class” on surveys, contrary to received wisdom.
Envy Up, Scorn Down

Not only do we not feel predictably middle class, but Americans certainly lack the “passionate middle-class” consciousness of Europeans, according to Louis Hartz: “A triumphant middle class . . . can take itself for granted.”¹⁴ In Hartz’s classic account, the American colonies had neither church canon nor feudal law to overthrow. The colonists had neither a uniform religion, having emigrated to protect the religious freedom of many small refugee sects, nor a hereditary nobility, having imported none. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans were “born equal without having to become so.”¹⁵

More recent research also suggests that Americans are not strongly invested in social class identities. In ethnographic interviews, blue-collar people rarely talk spontaneously about class in daily life, though they do discuss race, immigrants, religion, region, and extreme wealth or poverty.¹⁶ In general, Americans do not overwhelmingly insist on a middle-class identity because they do need not to.

If We’re Not All Middle Class, Whatever Happened to the American Dream?

If claiming middle-class status does not unite us, at least the American Dream does. Right? Yes. We are nearly unanimous (85 percent of us) about what the American Dream means: at a minimum, having high-quality health care and being able to feed yourself and your family. But most of us

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Figure 1.2 The Last Middle-Class-Centered Bell Curve: Self-Reported Social Class

Source: Author’s compilation based on data from Gallup Organization, poll 150 (1939).
lower. Contrary to our collective delusion, we are not leading the pack on opportunity.

So if the American Dream is not so devoted to material wealth as stereotype would have it, and if most of us cannot get rich anyway, we are clearly divided by our resources. What, if anything, unites us? Let’s go back to the inspiring but elusive link of shared ideology: opportunity.

**People Get the Class They Deserve**

It is our national orthodoxy that America is the land of opportunity. According to a pivotal survey by James Kluegel and Eliot Smith, Americans’ stable consensus endorses an opportunity syllogism:

(a) Assuming equal opportunity, then
(b) people get what they deserve, and
(c) the system is fair.\(^{26}\)

The first step, *equal opportunity as a shared assumption*, wins a full 70 to 88 percent agreement, whether in 1952, 1966, or 1980.\(^{27}\) More recent Gallup data show certainty declining from the peak of 77 percent who were satisfied with the level of opportunity in the United States in 2002 to 57 percent in 2009, but that still represents a comfortable majority.\(^{28}\) Despite war and recession, Americans continue to believe that opportunity is available to almost anyone who works hard. Collectively, ensuring opportunity itself matters to twice as many of us (66 percent) as reducing actual inequality.
who feels envy is experiencing an illegitimate threat to a deserving self.\textsuperscript{65} The experience of illegitimacy provokes anger, and the threat to self creates hurt. Envy homes in on disadvantage. As Gerrod Parrott notes, envy involves seeing that another person has something you want and wishing that person did not have it because their having it makes you feel inferior.\textsuperscript{66} Envy can be malicious when it focuses on taking something away from another person, not just obtaining it for yourself. Wanting to damage the privileged other person is the essence of envy because the envied person causes your disadvantage. Consider that paragon of envy, Shakespeare’s Iago. Bypassed for the coveted post of Othello’s lieutenant, Iago develops a deadly envy that catalyzes his revenge on Othello, his wife Desdemona, and his aide Cassio.\textsuperscript{67} In wreaking havoc, Iago does not even wish to have Desdemona for himself but instead wishes to deprive Othello of her. Envy thus has both a passive side (longing) and a potentially active side (aggression).

Unfair disadvantage is irksome. Envious people resent the overprivileged person but also the fate that bestows that advantage. In his analysis of everyday reports of envy, Parrott found that we resent not only the human agent of our disadvantage but also the unfair circumstances. We say that envy means longing and frustrated desire, as well as distress over feeling inferior and anxiety over losing status.\textsuperscript{68}

Envious people sometimes are self-aware enough to feel guilty about it. Social norms frown on envy, so we are reluctant to admit to the feeling. In work on the emotions felt toward social out-groups, my colleagues and I...
Galinsky and his colleagues. Their scarier study shows that priming power makes us worse at reading other people’s facial expressions. This attitude of “I couldn’t care less about you” shows scorn.

Other power researchers have replicated Galinsky’s priming results with people given actual power over other people. In our experiments, Stephanie Goodwin, our colleagues, and I recruited students who were expecting to work with other students from various majors. In this scenario, supposedly based on a Harvard Management Aptitude Scale but actually by random assignment, some students got to be “the boss” and others had to be “the assistant” on a joint task that included significant prize money as an incentive. In a preliminary management exercise, they were to judge a series of other students described only by college major and personality traits. (On campus, majors serve as shared stereotypes; consider the common images of engineers versus artists.) In their ratings, “bosses,” as predicted, used their personal stereotypes about college majors more than “assistants” did. That is, they made superficial judgments. Conversely, assistants used the individually revealing personality traits more than bosses did. As in the other studies, then, these power-holders were less sensitive to others as unique individuals—yet another form of scorn.

To be sure, power-holders sometimes can take responsibility for others, under the right circumstances. Power and status are always accompanied, however, by the risk of developing a scornful insensitivity to subordinates as power-holders control them, derogate them, fail to individuate them,
However, some people do not light up our mPFC. Social groups that elicit contempt and disgust, alone among all other out-groups and in-groups, do not excite our mPFC in the way everyone else does. Harris and I built on the Fiske lab’s finding that homeless people and drug addicts disgust other people—that is, people scorn them. After sliding into Princeton’s scanner, our volunteers viewed dozens of photos of supposedly disgusting out-groups as well as other not-disgusting out-groups, such as older people or people with disabilities (who are pitied), rich people (who are envied), and in-groups, such as all-around Americans and college students (who inspire pride). The supposedly disgusting, most extreme out-groups failed to light up the mPFC (see figure 1.6).92 (This neural dog definitely did not bark.) In regular questionnaires, participants reported these supposedly disgusting out-groups to be less warm or familiar, less competent, articulate, or intelligent, and less typically human. They also reported having a harder time attributing a mind to members of these out-groups—just as the quiet mPFC would suggest—and they did not expect to interact with them.

This disgust-contempt-scorn response fits a dehumanizing neglect of the minds of certain other people. Admittedly, we not only scorn but also pity homeless and drug-addicted people, yet our pity is not as great as it is for old or disabled people. And disgust uniquely targets these social outcasts. Sadly, this unfortunate reaction is only natural. We need to avoid disgusting people and things because they often are contaminated, as Steve Neuberg and Cathy Cottrell have shown.93 It makes adaptive
tion that they are conspiring. All too often we assume that the powerful are in cahoots to carry out their dangerous intents, that they are all of one evil mind. Recall that canard, “the Jews control the banking industry.” In one study, Eric Dépret and I simulated a situation in which those in power hold all the cards and they all hang together, so that one feels helpless to influence them. In this scenario, undergraduates came into a study where they could earn money for their performance under the distraction typically inflicted by roommates. The distracters had either more or less power (they could interfere a little or a lot), and they came either from one college major (they were in cahoots) or from several majors (they were unlikely to conspire). Faced with a uniform bunch of high-powered math majors, psychology majors felt more unhappy and threatened than they did when dealing with a motley high-powered group comprising a math major, an art major, and a business major. They perceived high-status outsiders as having minds, but cold, calculating, threatening, conspiring minds. In the worst case, such a perception would justify the elimination of a high-status group as a threat to “us.”

When envy entails anger and resentment, it harms the envied other. At a societal level, people who report both envy and anger toward privileged
tively, by knowing their status. Worldwide, people believe that high status confers competence (hard to believe sometimes when we consider some of the buffoons in charge.2) But in theory and usually in practice, we believe in meritocracy and think that other people generally deserve what they get. All over the world, high-status people, those who hold down prestigious jobs and have achieved economic success, are assumed to be more competent than low-status people. Amy Cuddy, Peter Glick, and I have developed these ideas into the BIAS Map shown in table 1.1.

The distinctions matter because they divide us from each other in our everyday encounters, whether in a New England village, Chicago’s Gold Coast, the beaches of Waikiki, or anywhere in between. We have strong feelings about clusters of people in society. As shown in the top half of table 1.1, many of us feel pride about iconic middle-class Americans. On the other hand, we pity disabled people and older people. Although these reactions can disturb us, they mostly reflect benign intentions because these are all people who are on our side, whether they are allegedly competent (middle class, American) or allegedly not (older, disabled).

More bothersome is the bottom half of the BIAS Map. We all too often envy the rich and scorn the poor. Neither is an admirable reaction, but both are all too natural. These comparisons up and down the status system divide us from each other. What is most disturbing is that we persist in denying what ails us.

Americans Minimize Status Distinctions, So Aren’t We All Equal?

Americans are famously egalitarian. Our founding documents confirm that we share equal starting points and equal rights to pursue happiness. Yet the reality is that we are less equal than we think we are. Americans are deeply divided by class and status.

After this chapter, the rest of the book focuses on more personal status divides, based in the everyday comparisons that bother us, from the hierarchies at work to the better bodies seen at the gym to the threatening

### Table 1.1 The BIAS Map: Stereotypes of Warmth (Friend-Foe) and Competence (Status)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low-Status—Incompetent</th>
<th>High-Status—Competent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend-warm (friendly, trustworthy)</td>
<td>Disabled people, older people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foe-cold (hostile, exploitative)</td>
<td>Poor people, addicts, homeless people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s compilation based on Fiske et al. (2002); Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2007).
know enough to be afraid. People with an overactive amygdala are afraid of their own shadow. The amygdala allows rapid and automatic responses to salient events, marshaling attention and arousal. The amygdala is involved in instantly evaluating stimuli, especially unpredictable stimuli. Among the most unpredictable but most important stimuli we notice are other people. In social cognition, the amygdala reliably comes on line when we encounter people who matter to us emotionally, for good or ill.

The amygdala activates in both kinds of social encounters that concern us here, that is, both occasions for envy (up the status ladder) and occasions for scorn (down the ladder). Social comparisons upward and downward both matter to us, as the amygdala responses suggest. Lasana Harris and I observed the activation of people’s amygdalas in just these kinds of social comparisons up and down. In Princeton’s brain scanner, undergraduates looked at forty-eight people in pictures that showed recognizable social groups across our BIAS Map’s warmth-competence space (figure 2.1).

After viewing each individual for six seconds, participants indicated which emotion the picture made them feel. We predicted that students...
looking down the status hierarchy at homeless people and drug addicts would often report disgust (a close cousin of contempt and scorn). And we predicted that students looking up the hierarchy at rich people and businesspeople would often report envy. Indeed, they did report disgust and envy, respectively, down and up. What is more, their amygdalas activated in both cases (figure 2.2).

Other studies report the amygdala coming on line for both envied and scorned people. In another example of neuro-envy, amygdala responses to the faces of male CEOs predicted not only their rated leadership ability (the brain was signaling: this is someone to watch!) but also their company’s profits. In a completely different envy domain, consider this study: young women viewed photographs of slender female fashion models, under instructions (cruel!) to compare their own bodies to those of the models. The participants’ amygdala activation correlated with their reported anxiety while viewing those slim bodies.

For an example of the amygdala implicated in neuro-scorn, consider studies of white students’ reactions to pictures of unfamiliar black students. The finding that the amygdala activated especially for white students who scored high on a subtle measure of racism is consistent with this neural response being more about their distaste than their simple discomfort with a racial out-group. As a growing scientific consensus indicates, the amygdala is implicated in responses to emotionally important people both up and down the hierarchy.
Besides the amygdala alerting other parts of the brain, what brain systems activate specifically to upward comparison? Envied people, by definition, have what we would like to have. High-status people have prestige, and high-powered people control resources. Either or both of these assets would be nice to have, so we humans often set our minds to meeting this challenge. First, we have to notice the discrepancy between us and them—namely, the fact that they are better off. Second, we have to pay attention to them if we want to control our own fate. The neural systems involved with envy fit this two-step logic.

First, we notice the gap between ourselves and the person we envy. The brain’s anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) is a discrepancy detector (figure 2.3). When simultaneous inputs conflict, the ACC directs attention to the discrepancy so that higher-order systems can resolve the conflict. Perhaps it is a stretch, but upward comparison would seem to present such a potential conflict. Someone just like us is doing well, but that someone is not us. The neural evidence so far fits this speculation. Studies of envy as upward social comparison often report ACC activation. The young women looking at idealized female bodies activated the ACC. Another study homed in on envy: asked to read about three other students, among them a same-sex peer who had superior credentials, popularity, possessions, and opportunity, students naturally reported being envious of this person. What is more, the ACC also activated toward this envied peer more than toward the others. Better evidence yet, the ACC activation correlated with participants’ reported envy. Still other ACC data suggest envy. Being treated unfairly can activate the ACC, among
On the downside of the comparison divide, the amygdala serves scorn by alerting us to someone who is emotionally salient. But obviously, the emotional salience of scorn differs from the emotional salience of envy. For one thing, envy approaches, but scorn avoids. People distance themselves from scorned others, to avoid real or symbolic contamination. Consider why we avoid homeless street people: because of our expectations, we dread their dirt and disease, we fear getting involved with them, and we shun any association with them. The amygdala alerts us to these apparently tainted people.

Consistent with the disgust that people report feeling toward these lowest of the low, the brain’s insula reliably activates when we see homeless people or drug addicts (figure 2.4). The insula generally reacts to our experience of our own bodily states, such as feeling disgusted or feeling aroused. The insula’s relation to disgust is among the most reliable neural indicators of any emotion. Both the insula and the amygdala respond to various scorned outcasts, including those who are obese, pierced, or transsexual. What is more, responding to other people’s disgust expressions activates the observer’s own insula, a sort of mimicked, shared disgust response. To scorn another person is to view that person as inferior and potentially disgusting, so the insula findings make sense.

To scorn another person is also to view yourself as superior. Scorn requires the vertical fact of the self apparently doing better. Such self-congratulations apparently light up the brain’s reward system. That is, positive social comparison activates the ventral striatum (VS) (figure 2.5). The VS responds to our own advantages in reputation.

Source: Author’s illustration.
Note: Figure shows the lateral surface, outside where the insula lies in the interior.
people more often encounter ingratiating praise than lower-status people do. When we read others’ praise of us, our VS lights up. The VS also activates when we give to charity, another reward of being high status.\(^3^2\)

To feel scorn, we have to stand above others, and narcissists that we are, elevating ourselves is rewarding.\(^3^3\)

**Neural Signatures of Schadenfreude**

A potent mixture of envy and scorn happens when an envied person is brought down and becomes an object of scorn. Consider the guilty pleasure that people feel at the latest news of a billionaire’s comedown. (From the last decade, Martha Stewart, Bernie Madoff, Tiger Woods, and countless politicians and entertainers come to mind.) People most often feel schadenfreude—pleasure at the misfortune of another person—when that person was once envied. Their seemingly deserved misfortune makes the person an object of scorn. For example, consider the Armani-suited, Blackberry-toting hedge fund manager who steps in dog poo while dashing toward his limo at the curb; he is laughable. But a homeless person or a disabled person stepping in dog poo is not funny. In Princeton graduate student Mina Cikara’s dissertation showing exactly how rewarding it is to be able to scorn an envied person, the VS is implicated once again.\(^3^4\)

Similarly, in the envy study that made students compare themselves to an advantaged peer, the students later learned that the peer had experienced a setback. This misfortune not only activated the VS (rewards), but the VS correlated with the prior envy study’s ACC (discrepancy monitor).\(^3^5\) This suggests that schadenfreude depends on a discrepant upward comparison.

All these potential neural signatures—for envy, scorn, schadenfreude—bring on line the brain systems for vigilance, social problem solving, and
Conversely, to scorn someone is to confirm our own satisfactory position, so scorn signals not minding the gap, except to keep our distance from the apparently worse-off person. When we want to maintain our status, we know that we had better avoid “stigma by association.” Steve Neuberg and his colleagues originated the term, applying it to how people stigmatize straight people who have a gay friend; Michelle Hebl and Laura Mannix show that stigma by association arises even when a normal-weight person is merely next to an obese person.41 No surprise, then, that we tend to avoid other people with a bad reputation or simply an unattractive appearance—to avoid being tarred by the same brush.
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Figure 2.6 Sample Stimulus for Schadenfreude

Got soaked by a taxi driving through a puddle

Source: Author’s illustration.

Figure 2.7 Zygomaticus Major: The “Smile” Muscle That Reveals a Subtle Sign of Schadenfreude

Source: Adapted and redrawn from Tassinary, Cacioppo, and Green (1989), figure 4.
group into themselves, so they react emotionally on behalf of their group. Maybe the group itself does not literally experience emotions, but people report emotions they feel as a group member. (“As an American, I feel proud.” “As a Republican, I feel angry.”) These group-oriented emotions, distinct from a person’s feelings as an individual, depend on identification with the group and its shared values. If our cherished group is low status, we feel low status as a group member, and we experience the attendant emotions on behalf of our group. So, too, with high status. Our tribe’s place in society determines collective emotions, including envy and scorn.
Along these lines, in-group inferiority hurts. When our favorite team loses, for example, we envy the competition their victory. The social neuroscientist Mina Cikara recruited die-hard Red Sox and Yankees fans to watch a video game version of single baseball plays in which their team succeeded or failed against their longtime rival. Of course, people reported pleasure at their own team’s success, as well as anger and pain at their team’s failure. They also wished their rivals ill just as much: they were pleased at their rival’s failure, as well as angry and pained at their rival’s success. Then there is the malicious logic of schadenfreude: these fans reported pleasure whenever their rival lost even to another team altogether.

As before, brain scans back up these self-reported emotions. Mere team loyalty made fans show brain activity that looked like empathic pain in response to their team’s failures. Fans also activated part of the brain’s reward network within the ventral striatum in response to own-team wins and rival-team losses to each other (see figure 2.9). What is more, the VS also activated in the schadenfreude case—rival-team losses to another team. Social identity as a fan is enough to get the neural reward networks going. And schadenfreude has consequences: this VS reward activation correlates with fans’ reports of heckling, insulting, threatening, and hitting rival fans.65

Why do people even care about a rival’s matchup with a third party? The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the pain of own-group inferiority directs the mind to the substitute pleasure of out-group failure.66 Maintaining loyalty to our own group, in the face of demoralizing low status, works better if the members of our group can share anger about our
“nasty” implies either mean and cruel or gross and disgusting, so immoral behavior is nauseating. Disgust rejects, excludes, and repels. Our disgust toward some people signals that they have breached a sacred taboo, dirtying themselves, endangering sanctity and purity. When we admit feeling disgust toward homeless people and injection-drug users, we are reacting partly to the image of these people as contaminated, both morally and physically. Disgust announces that the culture excludes such people from full humanity. Moreover, our desire to avoid disgusting other people is a powerful incentive to avoid disgusting, immoral behavior.

Gossip is a form of social control that capitalizes on disgust. People are more likely to repeat disgusting stories, and no one wants to be the topic of such gossip. In one demonstration, students read a series of happy, sad, or disgusting anecdotes about another student; then they had to choose which story to communicate to their acquaintances. The most disgusting stories (for example, about gross public drunkenness) topped the list. Urban myths circulate selectively, to the extent that they are disgusting. Chip Heath, Chris Bell, and Emily Sternberg scored the themes of disgusting web legends and found that all of them communicated what is disgusting and therefore taboo (figure 2.10).

Contempt also is a moral emotion; indeed, along with disgust, it predicts what will appear on urban legend websites. Contempt communicates that someone has offended community norms, and maintaining the proper hierarchy is one such norm. That is, people risk contempt when they step...
When we are not thinking hard (that is, when we are operating on automatic), repeated upward comparisons make us devalue our own performance. If we are practiced at comparing up, that comes to seem like our default status. Apparently, we automatically assume that frequency implies quantity. This heuristic could easily be wrong, as when an individual happens to be a big fish in a big-fish pond. Many high-achieving students at top-notch schools, for example, feel inadequate because of a warped set of comparisons (see figure 2.11).

The same experience of inadequacy may plague someone who happens to be partnered with or related to a genius. (Chapter 4 comes back to this idea.) Friends with an identical ambition or love interest may cease to be friends. Chance circumstances determine our most immediate, automatic, personal comparisons, for good or ill.

Fortunately, when we bother to think, we can overcome these automatic biases. For example, the repeated upward-exposure effect is reduced when we bother to deliberate about our comparisons. Perhaps we realize that we are seeing some of the same information repeatedly, so we discount the redundant comparisons. We can override our default inferiority complex when motivated to consider the opposite.

**Groups Identify Comparative Rank**

The better angels of our nature also emerge when we take the comparison less personally. So far, we have considered people as individuals (“I, me, mine”) contrasting themselves with other individuals. When we compare up and down in a collective mind-set (“we, us, our”), we assimilate instead of contrasting. That is, we rate ourselves as more similar to either the unattractive inferior or the attractive superior, depending on whom we
Envy Up, Scorn Down

Figure 2.12 Group Bias

Source: Author’s compilation based on Bettencourt et al. (2001) meta-analysis of eighty-seven studies.
Note: Group bias depends on status. High-status groups favor themselves and disfavor the out-group, especially on status-related dimensions, such as competence. Low-status groups favor themselves and disfavor the high-status group on dimensions relevant to their low-status identity—for example, warmth and other undervalued dimensions.

less-desirable, low-status-relevant dimensions. So, for example, higher-status people view themselves, and are viewed by others, as competent (smart, capable), but lower-status people promote themselves as warmer (nicer, more honest). These are self-stereotypes, granted, but sometimes they spill over to the societal stereotypes held by high- and low-status people alike. Examples of this division of identity echo across stereotypes of racial majorities and minorities (driven versus easygoing), men and women (agentic versus communal), and upper and lower classes (elitist versus down to earth) (figure 2.12).

Altogether, our minds understand ourselves, our group-mates, and our societies by making sense of who is above and below whom. This pattern of cognition matters because our vertical thoughts and feelings predict our behavior, as the next section shows.

Behavior Puts Brains, Emotions, and Minds in Motion

We enact our status all the time. Everyday encounters follow status scripts, which we all recognize. Psychologists do not know how status affects behavior when people are alone, but we know a lot about how status works when people behave together, whether as individuals or as groups.
Social policies that scorn the needs of society’s outcasts amount to this same utilitarian choice. Scorn is inattention where attention must be paid.

If scornful behavior is ugly, so too is envious behavior, which is sometimes provoked by the threat of feeling scorned. Aggression often stems from threats to fragile self-esteem. Bullies indeed are insecure, as conventional wisdom has it. To them, aggression often feels like self-defense; aggressors readily interpret chance encounters as personally directed hostility. The malicious intent of upward envy is to bring down the powerful who threaten the self. Envy generates a wish to punish others for being better off; this is active harm, reported by our survey respondents to include attacking and fighting the envied (see figure 2.13).

Society needs for people to feel what behavioral economists call inequity aversion, that is, to suffer envy from being behind or guilt at being ahead. Social psychology research indicates that we feel worse about being behind than we mind being ahead. Society enforces fairness through individuals’ reactions to unfair advantage. We worry about this more when we expect to see each other frequently, when we care about our reputation, and when we respect reciprocity for cooperation. That is, we care about inequity when we are socially connected. Aversion to unfair inequality predicts good outcomes like altruism but also altruistic punishment—the social reward for punishing norm violators.

Society also requires that lower-status people cooperate with the higher-status people they may envy. Ongoing transactions demand that subordinates go along to get along, a kind of passive accommodation and association, according to our surveys. Higher-status groups control resources that lower-status groups need, so lower-status groups accommodate themselves to what they cannot change, when times are stable.

Nevertheless, envy produces mixed and volatile behavior. Consider the case of outsider entrepreneurs, such as Asians and Jews in diaspora. Historically, they have tended to set up successful businesses. In quiet times, lower-status groups put up with and even defer to these high-status groups, shopping at their stores, acknowledging though resenting their

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**Figure 2.13 Envy Affects Aggression by Way of Anger**

![Diagram showing the relationship between Envy, Anger, and Active Harm: Attack, Fight with coefficients 0.79 and 1.07]
power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, but because many people seek power and dominance simply because it feels good, perhaps power has benefits even beyond the bedroom.

Dominance not only allows us to have positive feelings about ourselves but also creates negative feelings in us against others. When high-status people feel on top of the world, they are more likely to express anger and disgust (cousins of scorn and contempt). A furrowed brow indicates anger, and anger in turn signals dominance without any softening affiliation. In one demonstration of this, undergraduates viewed three dozen photographs of faces expressing a variety of emotions (anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, neutrality) and rated each one on thirty-two personality traits. The traits fit into two basic dimensions and certain emotions convey certain personalities. Expressing anger and disgust (scorn!) toward someone else, for instance, suggests a dominant personality devoid of affiliative orientation (table 2.1).

Expressing anger not only implies ruthless dominance but also gains the advantage in negotiation against a weaker partner. Contempt subordinates, rejects, and excludes other people. Scorn signals the freedom to look down on others, so in that perverse way it serves the power-holder.

What could possibly be useful about the other side, the envious feelings that come with disadvantage? Presumably, none of us like to come out on the bottom of a comparison in an everyday encounter. And videos of our facial expressions reveal that we especially mind someone else doing better if the arena is relevant to us and the other person is close to us.

The litany of discomfort is familiar to us all. If we are low status, public comparison makes us ashamed, a feature of envy. Similarly, we feel bad if our romantic partner has power over us, and our self-esteem suffers as a result. When we are at a disadvantage, we often feel threatened, which can make us judge that we have insufficient resources to meet the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High affiliation</th>
<th>Low Dominance</th>
<th>Low affiliation</th>
<th>High Dominance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear, sadness</td>
<td>(No typical emotions)</td>
<td>Happiness, Anger, disgust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s adaptation based on data from Knutson (1996, figure 2).
Note: Anger implies a dominant, unaffiliative personality; happiness implies a dominant, affiliative personality; fear implies a submissive but affiliative personality; the fourth personality combination is not represented by any emotions. As with the dehumanization we show for people seen as low-status–incompetent or exploitative-hostile (Harris and Fiske 2006), observers have difficulty imagining any emotions characteristic of these lowest of the low. Note the similarity to the BIAS Map’s status-competence and cooperation-warmth dimensions (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007).
Comparison Malaise: Unhappy and Out of Control

Comparison creates malaise. In opinion polls, a comfortable 51 percent say that they earn about as much as they deserve, as opposed to fully 38 percent who say that they get less than they deserve.24 That is a lot of disgruntled people. Who are they? Those disposed to social comparison are likely to be unhappy, to seek control, and to feel insecure and uncertain. The result is not a pretty picture for the comparison-obsessed.

Take the most general malaise first: some people are simply more unhappy than others, whether by temperament or by choice.25 This shows up in people’s self-reports of being a very happy (or unhappy) person, both absolutely and relative to peers, and then agreeing (or not) that they resemble people who “are generally very happy; they enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything,” versus those who “are generally not very happy; although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be.”

In Douglas Adams’s The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Marvin the Paranoid Android, a robot based on an unhappy personality type, is constantly informing everyone around him that he is more miserable than they are. Some examples:

“The first ten million years were the worst,” said Marvin, “and the second ten million years, they were the worst too. The third ten million years I didn’t enjoy at all. After that I went into a bit of a decline.” . . . “I got very bored and
Having your well-being contingent on others’ opinions, as noted, undermines self-esteem. For example, an important dimension for women when they compare themselves to other people is appearance, especially their bodies. For women, this kind of social comparison predicts dissatisfaction with their own body. An entertaining if tangential example comes from my experience with a visiting colleague known for his exceptionally tailored and elegant appearance. Feeling suddenly shabby, I retreated to the women’s room, only to discover two female colleagues likewise repairing their appearance. The situation was especially odd because our colleague was gay; we were trying to meet the high standard he set, not trying to attract him.

Women tend to be more interdependent than men, so their concerns center relatively more on relational traits. Everyone hopes that other people will be trustworthy and warm (and secondarily that they will be competent), but women especially care about that first interpersonal dimension, trust and warmth. Women, like men, self-stereotype, but their relational orientation makes them compare less and connect more. This orientation makes them better able to bask in an intimate’s success rather than make invidious comparisons. Priming people to think interdependently has the same effect as gender, suggesting that the female-relational orientation is an even more plausible interpretation of gender differences. Wendi
mantic. Competitiveness makes tough-minded, high-SDOs feel more negative toward even harmless subordinate groups, such as housewives and people with disabilities. A cluster of attitudes shows that high-SDOs view these groups as competition and then both disrespect and dislike them. SDO often includes the belief that such subordinate groups consume resources, grab influence, and do not deserve support.

Socially subordinate groups themselves are usually lower on SDO, and they naturally prefer equality. Though they recognize hierarchy, they view it as unfair. Low-status groups face a conflict between favoring their in-group and living within a system that devalues it, so they show more ambivalence toward their own group than high-status people show toward theirs. The more low-status groups view hierarchy as inevitable, the worse is this internal conflict between valuing their group and acknowledging society’s contempt for it. SDO increases their ambivalence for their own low-status group because it increases this tension.

Various other asymmetries distinguish low- and high-status groups because of their social dominance orientation. Regardless of group membership, however, people who believe in group hierarchies also endorse prejudices such as racism, sexism, and classism, as well as ideologies that legitimate them, such as meritocracy (see chapter 1) and status quo policies. Nevertheless, it is high-status, socially dominant groups that particularly prefer hierarchies.
individualist are the East Asian countries. In the United States, Asian Americans are the least individualist, Latino Americans are equivalent to European Americans, and African Americans are the most individualist. The American states that score highest on individualism are the mountain western, Great Plains, and northern New England states. 

Individualists belong to more groups, but looser ones, a finding that correlates with loyalty but not with conformity to one’s group. Individualism is associated with general trust in people, which frees individualists to operate in a broad though uncertain social context. In comparisons across states within the United States and across cultures in dozens of countries, individualists participate in many friendship groups and political activities. In this freewheeling set of overlapping networks, upward and downward comparisons locate the individual in relation to other individuals. Differences are tolerated, and individuality rules. In social comparison, individualists contrast self with others. Individualist cultures may encourage envy through competition. Especially if they are egalitarian, everyone can expect to succeed as much as anyone else. Even at a neural level, dominance is rewarding (see figure 3.4). In an individualist culture that is also an “honor society,” people prioritize reputation and fear shame, so upward comparison can be particularly humiliating, and envy especially dangerous. In honor societies, individuals use violence to protect their reputation. Without a

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**Figure 3.4 Brain Activity of Individualist Americans and Collectivist Japanese**

![Brain Activity Diagram](image)

Note: The figure shows the activation of primary reward areas (left panel) to dominant and submissive stimuli (right panel), respectively, for individualist Americans and collectivist Japanese.
Figure 4.1  Using Comparison As Information: Cancer Patients

Source: Author’s compilation based on data from Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman (1985). Note: In seventy-three cancer patients, the majority reported making reassuring downward comparisons in evaluating their physical condition.

Figure 4.2  Believing in Own and Others’ Control: Adjustment to Cancer

Source: Author’s compilation based on data from Taylor, Lichtman, and Wood (1984). Note: For breast cancer patients, thinking that both self and others can control their breast cancer helps adjustment, illustrating the importance of perceived control.
would pick someone similar, but that in evaluating their beliefs they would focus on someone expert. As predicted, to evaluate liking, the students compared their preferences to those of someone similar, but to evaluate beliefs, they compared their choices to those of someone more knowledgeable.

**Handy Enough to Be Fast**

We compare so spontaneously that we do it automatically, and we use whoever is at hand. We do not necessarily have a choice: sometimes the environment imposes involuntary comparisons that we absorb, like it or not. Thomas Mussweiler and his colleagues have shown in a series of studies that when people evaluate, for example, their own cheerfulness or passion, thoughts of their best friends come easily to mind as automatic standards. They demonstrated this by measuring what was topmost in people’s minds. After self-evaluations, participants in these studies could detect their friends’ names faster from among a series of names and random-letter strings. They automatically activated knowledge about their friends as comparisons when they evaluated themselves, even if it was not required (see figure 4.3).

We are so ready to make comparisons that we use even strangers as standards. If we are reflecting, for example, on our own aggressiveness,
sue careers in accounting or teaching were inspired by a relevant role model who won an award, and they rated themselves higher as a result of merely reading about the award. Attainability matters: first-year students were inspired by a superstar graduate, whereas fourth-year students were deflated because it was too late for them (see figure 4.4). Similarly, people who believe that intelligence is flexible are inspired by upward comparisons because they believe that success is controllable, but people who believe that intelligence is fixed are discouraged, presumably because they believe that success is not controllable.

**A Comment on the Need to Know and Control**

We make sense of ourselves by finding other people who are similar enough to us to be meaningful, expert enough to be right, handy enough to be fast, or near enough to inspire. All of these comparison tools make us sound supremely reasonable. Are we really that efficient and effective? As info-bots, we are in fact deeply flawed by the very strategies that usually make us good enough for everyday purposes. Being fast and frugal has its advantages on the fly, but its quality does not always hold up to closer scrutiny. Considering that we make sense of ourselves by recruiting information, assessing it, and comparing it, there is plenty of room for error.

Generally, in seeking and using information, we know more about ourselves than we do about other people—and we know it better and
odds of doing well. Fantasies promote inaction, but high expectations motivate action.

The future self motivates us, and we value the future more than the past. Self-esteem depends on the future self more than on the past self because the future is elastic, while the past is rigid. In Neil Weinstein’s classic study, Rutgers students reviewed forty-two positive and negative future events and estimated the comparative chance (relative to their same-gender classmates) that they would experience each of them. They felt 50 percent more likely to enjoy their first job than other people, 44 percent more likely to own a home, and so on for the positive events, but even more, they felt immune to the negative events (alcoholism, suicide, divorce) relative to their classmates (see figure 5.2). They tended to focus on desirability and probability for the positive events: the more desirable and probable the goal, the more certain they were about their plans to achieve it for themselves. For the negative events, accordingly, they tended to focus on being preventable and stereotypic: the more these events were allegedly controllable and applicable only to certain victim types, the less participants had to worry for themselves. For example, if only losers are unemployed, then as a hardworking person, I am protected. Thus do we easily imagine all the personal factors that would make our future selves exceptions to the challenges faced by everyone.

Daniel Gilbert, Timothy Wilson, and their colleagues have amassed a mountain of evidence that we forecast our futures to be decidedly different from the shabby present. Besides our hopeful prediction that good
events will prevail over bad ones, we expect more sheer drama than we get. That is, we expect our future windfalls to delight us more and our future tragedies to devastate us more than they actually do. We overestimate both the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions to events. We do this mainly by focusing on the anticipated event and neglecting everything else that will be going on at the same time—that is, the simultaneous events that will tend to dampen the main event. If we break a bone, it will indeed be horrible, but our partner, our job, and our friends will distract us from the mishap. Also, we will cope better psychologically because we will adapt faster than we expect. We especially exaggerate the expected devastation that will be caused by negative events; in fact, most of us are more resilient than we would expect. In short, we adapt faster than we expect especially to misfortune. Overall, when we compare our present self to our past self and our future self, we are motivated, more than the facts justify, and in spite of our admission that the past was cloudy, to forecast sunny if variable days ahead.

**Triangulating on Me**

Although we tend to compare our current self to our past or future selves—which gives a lot of leeway for constructing comparisons that favor the current self—sometimes we take a baby-step outside of ourselves to create a comparison fantasy. American teens are especially prone to compare themselves with their image of the kind of person they want to be, a form of
upward social comparison, but using an abstract ideal instead of a real person. They want to do what they imagine is the prototypical thing, whether it is smoking, drinking, reckless driving, or unsafe sex. Social comparison norms shape health habits, both good (exercise) and bad (smoking). People who socially compare a lot are especially prone to parrot the prototype. But this kind of comparison is of course entirely in the mind.

Comparison, like sex, is better as a social pursuit than a solitary one; we usually prefer an actual other to a fantasy other. Although our autobiographies reliably portray the growth of the main character, we seem to prefer stories with more than one character. Perhaps we are more likely to opt for solo self-scrutiny when no one else is available. Admittedly, such scrutiny comes easily considering that our pathetic past selves especially enhance our near-perfect present selves because the old self cannot protest the comparison, and our even-better future selves do not have to prove themselves yet.

Having a more objective vantage point when we are outside observers of someone else, we view peers as a better basis for comparison than the same person over time. For example, to judge another person’s current absolute standing, would you rather know this person’s rank relative to peers or whether his or her own performance had improved or deteriorated over time? Relative rank, of course. Exactly. Only the expressly social comparison influences objective observers because even striking change over time says nothing about where the person started, let alone landed. Despite the soothing ascent stories we tell ourselves in private, we would be wiser to rely on our peers as proxies.

Moving out of the privacy of our own minds makes comparison complicated by creating a triangle, comprising self, other, and some area (see figure 5.3). For example, you may compare yourself with a friend on fitness. Whether up or down, the comparison is problematic for the friend-
Now we come full circle to the better-off looking down with scorn on the worse-off. Thomas Wills has proposed that when our well-being declines, we do precisely this, in order to feel superior.36 Human behaviors from aggression to scapegoating to prejudice to humor all feature downward comparison.

Common sense suggests that scorn is the privilege of those who securely inhabit the top of the heap, but research suggests otherwise. Those who are sliding down the heap are more likely to make downward comparisons in an effort to arrest their descent. Frederick Gibbons, Meg Gerrard, and their colleagues have examined downward comparison in the classroom (see figure 5.5). They find that students who perform poorly try to protect themselves from the implications of their failure by lowering their standards and expressing a preference for downward comparison over upward aspiration.37

People who are feeling low (depressed, low self-esteem, bad mood) can especially benefit from downward comparison.38 Downward comparison reduces regret, for example, among older people.39 Considering “what might have been” also improves mood and motivates us to try again, if we can.40 In these ways, downward comparison can encourage some of us, some of the time.41

To be sure, downward comparison can also be a bummer. Our worse-off peers could be possible selves, so feeling vulnerable to their fate can
deflate our own self-esteem (although it may also engage prevention strategies). With low self-esteem spiraling out of control, a downward comparison can have negative implications for us. Also, sheer emotional contagion can make downward comparison depressing, if the peer seems similar to self.

The point here, however, is that the people at the top do not derogate others nearly as much as those who are trying to distance themselves from the heap into which they fear falling. Downward comparison is at best a short-term coping process, not a long-term strategy. Better long-term strategies maintain optimism, feelings of control, and adequate self-esteem. These strategies, in turn, encourage us to cope actively, seeking support from friends and family and not avoiding the issues. These personally oriented strategies rely less on social comparison—which typically preoccupies people with vulnerable self-esteem—and more on personal standards, which aid self-improvement as well as self-enhancement.

To go back to the section title, scorn’s “no harm, no foul” happens in two ways. True scorn (self-protective downward comparison) says, “If I am feeling threatened, I am doing this to help myself, not harm you, so why do you care?” Neglect scorn (simple inattention) says, “No offense, but I’ve got my own work to do, and I am not actually busy looking down on you, so relax.” Either way, personal scorn may be less of an issue than worse-off friends fear it is.
women consider a fashion model on non-appearance dimensions (such as brains and personality), suddenly she does not seem so intimidating, and with that in mind, they report feeling better even about their own bodies.53

The Hospital

The ultimate body comparison involves survival. People who are severely ill compare both up and down because each direction provides potential protection. People can imagine themselves as better off than the worst-case scenario of their illness, and healthier people inspire best-case scenarios.54

Patients seem to prefer comparing themselves to whoever has the most information, notably someone whose treatment is a little more advanced. For example, someone about to go into surgery can get information from a postoperative patient who has recently undergone the same procedure.55

Of course, coping is not just about seeking the best information. In matters of life and death, a reasonable sense of optimism and control, even if illusory, helps people cope with cancer, HIV/AIDS, heart disease, and other ruinous diagnoses. In Shelley Taylor’s pathbreaking research interviews with breast cancer patients, the women proved both remarkably resilient and remarkably unrealistic. They believed that their cancer was under control (either their own control or their doctors’) even as the illness progressed, and they selectively compared themselves to women even worse off. Both strategies helped them cope, and their illusions did not damage their adaptation.56 Squarely facing all the facts seemed to confer

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**Figure 5.6** Body Satisfaction in the Presence of Fat or Thin Vases

![Graph showing body satisfaction in the presence of fat or thin vases](chart.png)

Source: Author’s compilation based on data from Trampe, Stapel, and Siero (2007).
Note: Individual body dissatisfaction makes even a thin vase depress self-evaluations.
about the accomplishments of some stranger in the street? The accomplishments of our near and dear, however, pressure us to react. To escape the tension, we could dissolve the relationship (see left side of figure 5.7). Although we are reluctant to discontinue our relationships over unequal successes, sometimes we choose our friends to be nonthreatening in self-defining domains.\(^7^2\)

Second, how we respond depends on the personal relevance of the particular arena. The more relevant the domain is for us, the more magnified the comparison: I may not care about our relative ability to hurl a curling stone, but I will care deeply about our relative ability to write a book on envy and scorn. We maneuver the emotional minefields created by comparison primarily by changing how we interpret the self-relevance of other people’s accomplishments (see middle panel of figure 5.7). For example, if you and your friend are both ice-fishing aficionados, you could admit that your partner finds more fish than you do, but claim that you get better results from studying their habits when dormant. (Depending on your relative accomplishments as ice fishers, you might be well advised to adjust the self-relevance of hooking hibernating fish in February.)\(^7^3\)

Finally, we can diminish our partner’s success in the domain (see right side of figure 5.7). Some of us will even sabotage the performance of a close friend if the task is really self-relevant. In one classic Tesser study, students participated in a word identification task with friends and strangers. When the task was framed as measuring important skills (rather than presented as a game), students apparently interpreted the task as more self-relevant. Given the opportunity to provide clues to others, they gave harder clues to their friends than to strangers for the most personally relevant tasks. When the task was not personally relevant, they helped their friends more than the strangers.\(^7^4\) Similarly, students sometimes provided helpful hints to their friends, to improve their grades, but they reported doing this less for familiar than for unfamiliar others.\(^7^5\)

Depending on the importance of the relationship and the domain, emotions may run high.\(^7^6\) On a low-relevance task, we can afford to be gener-
Comparison also shapes life-or-death decisions and outcomes, including those that affect our health. For example, binge-eating spreads through sororities: sorority sisters compare themselves with each other to gauge just the “right” amount of binging that correlates with popularity. Networks spread health habits and health standards across three degrees of separation; the obesity of your friend’s friend’s friend correlates with your own. In the decades-long Framingham Heart Study, investigators asked participants to nominate someone who would know how to reach them if they moved. Their nominations, the nominations of their nominees, and so on down the line, created networks of health influences. Perhaps it is not surprising that as your best friend gains weight, you feel permission to add a few pounds yourself. But your friend’s friend’s friend, whom you may not even know? Other people in our network form the most relevant comparisons, which set standards for our health habits.

Conformity also shapes life-or-death decisions and outcomes, including those that affect our health. For example, binge-eating spreads through sororities: sorority sisters compare themselves with each other to gauge just the “right” amount of binging that correlates with popularity. Networks spread health habits and health standards across three degrees of separation; the obesity of your friend’s friend’s friend correlates with your own. In the decades-long Framingham Heart Study, investigators asked participants to nominate someone who would know how to reach them if they moved. Their nominations, the nominations of their nominees, and so on down the line, created networks of health influences. Perhaps it is not surprising that as your best friend gains weight, you feel permission to add a few pounds yourself. But your friend’s friend’s friend, whom you may not even know? Other people in our network form the most relevant comparisons, which set standards for our health habits.

Though social scientists believe that we are indeed fundamentally social beings, they are not totally sure how this network of contagion happens. Social support by family does not explain the spread of conformity because networks extend well beyond family. Indeed, friends increase a person’s odds of becoming obese by 57 percent, even more than do spouses and siblings (about 40 percent each). Merely observing your fat neighbor on his riding mower or your skinny neighbor out running does not explain social contagion, because neighbors do not necessarily make neighbors fat.

Rather, “the strength of weak ties” probably operates through trusted but indirect connections, communicating ideas, information, norms, and influence across social distances. Remember the social triangles—linking you, me, and some shared experience—from chapter 5. Now imagine a chain of triangles. The series of weak ties extends beyond tight social groups to strings of acquaintances, creating a sense of what is normal (see figure 6.1).

Network norms guide health habits such as smoking, drinking, weight-watching, food preferences, and cancer screening. Health networks probably also radiate stress, mood, self-esteem, and self-efficacy,
more in common (say, as Americans) than when you merely nodded on the street back home. Or salience may determine contrasting identities (for example, one black, one white), as when someone “plays the race (or gender or class) card,” suddenly making contrasting group memberships relevant.

We do not constantly think about ourselves in terms of our group identities. The same two people can relate in an interpersonal way or an intergroup way. After the 9/11 attacks, many Americans noticed that racial identities became less salient as shared American identity prevailed, at least temporarily. On a bus or a subway, people will studiously avoid eye contact, operating as individuals, until some bizarre public behavior makes everyone exchange glances, uniting in contrast to the deviant. Similarly, even a person alone at a computer can identify as an individual or as a group member, depending on which identity is relevant to what the person is doing. We all have multiple, flexible identities that depend on context.

Volumes of research and theory have studied this crucial multicultural phenomenon, but here the focus is on the continuum from interpersonal to intergroup. In an intergroup mode, we identify with our own in-group (either a group we claim as a member or an admired reference group) in contrast to some out-group. In the intergroup context, we consider other in-group members to be more relevant, so we compare mostly with others in our own group.
mental illness, they have a better perspective or a more solid character than someone who does not (figure 6.3). Even with stigma, we prefer to compare downward, showing our advantages. And for the majority of us who are not part of a stigmatized group, the public merit of our group increases its value.

Our Shared Identity

Besides their public value, in-groups also play an important role in identity—that is, its self-relevance to members who claim it as part of their self-concept. In-group identity multiplies the effects of its value, according to Correll and Park. For nonstigmatized groups, as we have seen, the reliable comparison effect mostly shows in-group assimilation and out-group contrast. The psycho-logic runs like this: an in-group comparison spontaneously brings to mind the details of how you resemble your peer, so your self-evaluation tends to be based on those accessible ideas, resulting in your assimilation to the in-group comparison person. On the contrary, comparison with an out-group member brings to mind the stereotypic categories that distinguish groups from each other, so that person seems to contrast with yourself.33

The more relevant the in-group, the more comparison makes us contrast with the out-group.34 William James and I (how nice to claim him in my in-group as a psychologist) find economists to be another species entirely. And as people who both value summering in New England, we
groups in society live in the midst of other groups . . . [and] only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparison with, other groups.”

Group identity therefore depends on the intergroup comparison. What is our specialty? Is our group good or bad at a particular task? Are we nice or not nice? Compared with which other groups?

A basic principle of social identity theory is that groups typically favor their own. Social beings that we are, we consistently enhance our in-group, showing the typical pattern of favoring and valuing our own group. So just as social comparison often reveals individuals enhancing themselves (chapter 5), so too in group comparison people enhance their in-group.

Indeed, the utility of downward comparison—individuals feeling better by looking down on other individuals—was anticipated by social identity work that showed groups looking down on other groups.

Each wave of immigrants, for example, famously scorns the next wave of newbies. Italian Americans, once scorned, can look down on Chinese Americans, who can look down on Latino Americans. On the basis of such comparisons, we feel group emotions, experience group attitudes, and justify group prejudices. To be sure, each immigrant group fights its own unique battles. At their worst, Italian immigrants were viewed as untrustworthy, whereas Chinese immigrants were viewed as untrustworthy but competent; Mexican immigrants are currently seen as neither trustworthy nor competent. Over time, each group joins the American
Challenging the System

Besides attempting group mobility through collective action or individual mobility through defection, low-status groups sometimes contest the legitimacy of the entire status system. Groups may choose which dimensions make relevant comparisons in order to come out on top. For example, although high-status groups favor themselves in status-relevant domains (such as competence), low-status groups often switch to status-irrelevant domains, a creative maneuver to achieve self-respect.56 Both the Dutch and the Turkish-Dutch see status-irrelevant dimensions (hospitable, tradition-minded, family-oriented, faithful, respectful toward the elderly) as more characteristic of the Turkish, but only those of Dutch origin think that status-relevant dimensions (efficient, achievement-oriented, disciplined, successful, persevering) are more characteristic of the Dutch.57

In a parallel case, competing schools carve up the achievement landscape in similar ways, according to status, and they salvage the group-esteem of the lower-status school by handing over some status-irrelevant crumbs. The more selective school is admitted by both schools to be the more academically elite—this being the status-relevant characteristic—but the lower-status school is allowed to be nicer.58 In research conducted with Julian Oldmeadow, students from two local colleges rated themselves and each other on traits related to competence (smart, capable,
in society, we need to form impressions. We need to know quickly whether the individual or the group comes as an ally or an enemy (warm or hostile), and next we need to know whether they can act on those intentions (competent or incompetent). These simple assessments combine to powerful effect—they construct a social map that distinguishes all of those people toward whom we feel pity, envy, scorn, and pride (figure 6.6).

When people map out society as a whole, regardless of their own group membership, they believe in the same warmth-competence trade-off that low- and high-status groups use when they barter in their specific rivalry. That is, when we compare any two groups, we believe that one is likely to be nicer but dumber, while the other is likely to be smarter but colder. This belief is truly strange, because normally valuing a person on one dimension spills over to praise on another dimension. This “halo effect” is as old as psychological science. But comparison changes everything. Somebody has to be better and somebody worse; usually, each side is better in particular ways and worse in others, that is, distinct domains: high on either warmth or competence, but not on both.
give direct, active aid to friends (assisting, helping, protecting) or to do direct, active harm to foes (fighting, attacking, sabotaging). We aim to facilitate the goals of our side and block the goals of the other side. Consistent with the readiness to act immediately on the friend-foe warmth dimension is the U-shaped response of the (left) amygdala to trustworthiness. That is, both extremes (extraordinary untrustworthiness and trustworthiness) spur instant vigilance. Judging trustworthiness tells us whom to approach and whom to avoid, who is good for us and who is bad for us.

After we make the friend-foe decision, we must next determine significance (effectiveness). The status dimension, remember, assumes someone else’s apparent competence to enact goals. This competence judgment intensifies the initial appraisal of good for me/us versus bad for me/us. A competent, effective friend or foe matters more than an ineffective, incompetent one. As such, this judgment follows the warmth-trustworthiness judgment, and the relevant behaviors are less urgent. Because being competent to enact goals is a secondary judgment, we engage in passive but positive behavior with competent, high-status people, essentially going along to get along (cooperating with, uniting with, associating with). In contrast, scorned, low-status people merit passive harm (excluding, ignoring, neglecting).
value than a shared birth date, but this shows how much we delight in any publicly shared merit.

The reverse is not true. People from publicly devalued groups do not necessarily feel terrible about themselves. Jennifer Crocker explains that people actively construct their self-esteem depending on their situation.28 Even people from groups that society stigmatizes—minorities, obese women, the mentally ill—can separate out their own private evaluation of their group and the public’s evaluation of it. Crocker and Riaa Luhtanen have a scale that distinguishes collective self-esteem, both public and private. Roughly, public and private self-esteem is the difference between how we see our group and how we know society sees it.

Crocker and Luhtanen also separately measure how good we think we are as a group member (membership esteem), as well as the importance to us of this identity; all four (public and private collective self-esteem, membership esteem, and identity importance) are distinct from individual self-esteem (see table 6.1).29 People high in private collective self-esteem—that is, they value their own group, regardless of what others may think—also favor their in-groups and disfavor out-groups.30 In other words, valuing their own group, they will do what they can to benefit it. Thus, although public value goes a long way toward making group membership useful, belonging to a devalued group does not make the in-group emotionally useless by any means. A variety of human rights movements show this: black power, feminism, gay rights, and disability alliances offer at least private collective self-esteem to each group member.

Another individual strategy used by stigmatized group members is downward comparison within the group. Downward comparison allows people with cancer, arthritis, mental handicaps, physical disabilities, or responsibility for ill infants to imagine others who share the same affliction but who seem even worse off.31 For example, people with schizophrenia see themselves as individually better off than others with schizophrenia, and even many others without it.32 They may feel that even if they suffer from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Sample Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private collective self-esteem</td>
<td>In general, I’m glad to be a member of the social groups that I belong to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public collective self-esteem</td>
<td>In general, others respect the social groups that I belong to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership esteem</td>
<td>I am a worthy member of the social groups I belong to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity importance</td>
<td>The social groups that I belong to are an important reflection of who I am.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

people are right to be vigilant because their theory that high-status people might scorn them proves to be true at least some of the time.

Low-status people have to be vigilant for another reason: from the position of the bottom looking up, status often correlates with power over resources, making their welfare contingent on the goodwill of those above them. The superior’s intentions matter a lot to the subordinate: if the boss is with you, great; the boss can help you get where you want to go. If the boss is not with you, you cannot predict help from that quarter, so you have to keep an eye on this person. Some of our lab’s earliest experiments aimed to bottle this phenomenon, using an involving method. Undergraduates found themselves depending on another person for a valued prize that was awarded depending on their joint performance. In one scenario, they arrived to find a couple of dozen colorful windup toys (my favorites: a hopping hamburger with teeth and a back-flipping race car). They and their partner were supposed to use these toys to create educational games for elementary school children who were learning basic math concepts; for instance, they could illustrate subtraction by having one toy whizz away from the others.

Before working together, they were given a chance to learn about their partner by reading post cards on which their peers had written their teaching evaluations. Stopwatches hidden in the experimenter’s jacket pockets timed how long they looked at this information. When they had to work
to this consequential expert uniquely distinguished surprising information, which was inconsistent with expectations, from uninformative information, which was consistent with expectations. As predicted, the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), that reliable center of the social cognition network, activated more to the surprising information, but only for the expert on whom their outcomes depended, not for the independent expert (see figure 7.2). Upward comparison—in this case, comparison that gauged the relative skill of an alleged expert—can engage the brain’s social cognition networks adaptively.

What mattered here was not only that one person needed another person but that the first person still expected some reasonable degree of control. Our own earlier research indicated that people do not try hard to make sense of someone who holds all the cards when they think that they cannot possibly influence or predict that person’s behavior. All power is asymmetrical and imbalanced, so power by definition reduces the control of the underling. But it matters whether power is absolute or just unequal. The more imbalanced power is, the greater the frustration for the powerless. Remember Nietzsche’s admonition about the impotence of the inferior, which leads to envious rage.

Our upward vigilance focuses on the people who control our outcomes but whom we may be able to influence. It took a French graduate student to tackle the balance-of-power problem with me. Originally, all of my
Envy Up, Scorn Down

Figure 7.3  The Age-Status Curve

![Diagram of the Age-Status Curve]

Source: Author’s creation based on data from North and Fiske (2010).

opining a novel view of ageism that captures younger people’s resentments toward their elders who get in the way of their own upward trajectory by not moving aside fast enough. The age-status curve is an inverted-U, reflecting three age cohorts: younger people moving up as they develop, middle-aged people enjoying their prime, and older people on the decline. Older people can create three kinds of trouble at each point of this otherwise peaceful progression. In each case, the individual overcomes the stereotype to create more elaborated—and polarized—reactions, from the perspective of the younger people on the move. This curve fits our envy-scorn narrative because the young are looking at their rank relative to that of middle-aged and older people (figure 7.3).

First, at the peak of the age-status curve, older people (at least, those who are just past middle age) can refuse to get out of the way, holding on to enviable positions, power, and wealth past the point when they should have arranged for orderly succession. Consider older, stingy Max, who “has enough insurance and savings to comfortably handle his own expenses. But, despite his younger relatives’ needs, he is reluctant to lend or share his money.” Younger people resent him, relative to generous Max, who gives away his money; they like generous Max a lot. (A younger person doing the same thing excites neither resentment nor admiration.) The prescription for seniors’ active succession grants a bonus to those who comply and imposes penalties on those who resist. Information can trump a stereotype when it exaggerates or contradicts it. All these processes depend on younger people comparing their situation to older people who share or who do not.

On the downward descent of the age-status curve, older people can get in the way more passively: through sheer inertia, they can consume shared societal resources. When older Max consumes expensive health care—
endorse more complex maps of their social groups. Although their maps include the us-versus-them extremes, at least as many groups—and often more—are seen ambivalently (see the BIAS Map for Mexico in figure 7.5). In our terms, more groups are seen as high on warmth or competence, but not both. This ambivalence may reflect a greater need to placate with some redeeming features those groups that are neither at the top nor at the bottom. Ambivalence suggests a bigger role for uncertainty, originating in more diffuse status competition, even with low mobility.

Whatever the country, inequality pits groups against each other. Status competition without mobility makes people unhappy. Even primates know this, at least if they are low-status. Subordinate primates suffer the most in stable dominance hierarchies. They must attend upward and avoid the bigger guys; high stress hormone levels reflect their uncertainty and unease.48

Status anxiety makes for good stories because it is complicated and unpredictable. F. Scott Fitzgerald knew this:

“We’re the damned middle class, that’s what!” he complained to Kerry one day as he lay stretched out on the sofa, consuming a family of Fatimas [cigarettes] with contemplative precision.
“Well, why not? We came to Princeton so we could feel that way toward the small colleges—have it on ’em, more self-confidence, dress better, cut a swathe—”

“Oh, it isn’t that I mind the glittering caste system,” admitted Amory. “I like having a bunch of hot cats on top, but gosh, Kerry, I’ve got to be one of them.”49

**How to Transform Envy and Scorn**

Can we cure status anxiety? When I tell people that I am a psychologist, I am quick to add, “But not the kind who actually helps people. I do research.” Usually they laugh, having assumed that a psychologist is necessarily a therapist. They also visibly relax when they realize that I do not read minds. But my intro is partly a lie. Research does help people, just indirectly, and I certainly hope that our field’s research can help people. Still, I am certainly not a clinician, so it is with some trepidation that I offer this section of how-to advice. I am emboldened by two possibilities: that people, including me, can use these tips to improve their lives, and that research has provided some helpful hints on how to do that. Once again, let’s work from the individual to relationships to groups, ending with society as a whole.
Beyond Comparison

Figure 7.6  Overlap of Self and Other to Measure Varying Closeness

Source: Author’s figure based on data from Aron et al. (1991).
Note: Participants choose the pair of circles that best represent their relationship.

a common identity, or a joint membership establishes safety and trust. In contrast, either envy or scorn signals a disconnect that needs repair. Having a unit relationship ensures that comparison is not a zero-sum game because the partners’ interests overlap. Cuing a “we” connection makes us think of our similarities instead of our differences. To promote this sense of being a unit, we may placate our partner by investing in the relationship. If we are worried about being envied, we will appease by helping and advising our envious partner.

In Groups: Teammates

At work, most of us operate in small face-to-face groups of three to six coworkers. Given our drive to compete, according to the insights of evolutionary theorists and all our earlier observations showing that comparison is human nature, managers might seem to have a problem on their hands. But the news is better than we might imagine. People do jockey for status, but the process is more constructive than “dog-eat-dog” versions of evolution might suggest, and the advice is clear-cut:

Show Commitment  Remember our refrain that we all need our groups to survive and thrive? To be safe, we compete for status and inclusion not just by beating others at the competence game but also by demonstrating our value to the group. Cameron Anderson and Gavin Kilduff show that of course competence supports status, but so does commitment to the group; we must demonstrate our value to the group to earn both respect for our competence and trust in our cooperativeness as a good team player. We naturally earn status through apparent competence, but our actual skills may not be the only variable. Consistent with the tough evolutionary view, people with dominant personalities signal their alleged expertise by high rates of intervention: they are always quick to volunteer ideas and information. Still, other people dislike such bare-knuckled dominance. In a more emphatically social evolutionary way, we signal our commitment to the group by competitive altruism. Generosity also garners influence. Selfless helping increases our value to the group, which