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Social hierarchy refers to systems of social organization in which some individuals enjoy a higher social status than others; such that those with higher social status have more access to material rewards and are deferred to by others. Humans in every culture attend to status cues, pursuing opportunities to gossip, chat, and internalize the myriad aspects of social hierarchy (Dunbar, 2004; Durkee, 2020; Hawley, 2014). 'Social impairment' has long been viewed as a defining feature of autism (e.g., Chevallier et al., 2012). An implication is that autistics would either ignore status or find its workings difficult to make out. We reject the premise of social deficits but follow recent pleas in the literature to investigate how different categories of social behavior may show a range of outcomes that differ from the neurotypical norm (Dawson & Cowen, 2019; Gillespie-Lynch, 2019). We begin by listening to the testimonies of autistic people, following Jaswal and Akhtar (2019), Dinishak (2019), Mitchell et al. (2019), and others. As documented below, these are consistent with disliking social hierarchies and finding status-seeking illogical, leading us to propose what we will call the *reduced status-seeking hypothesis*. This is a broad proposal and encompasses lack of attention to or lack of interest in status, suspicion and discomfort with status and social hierarchy.

We do not view reduced status-seeking as a deficit, but rather a difference from neurotypical (NT) sociality, which can have advantages or disadvantages for the lives of autistics (see also Forgeot d'Arca & Soulières, 2019) just as it has for those NT individuals who also avoid status-seeking. Indeed, as we will see, lack of interest in status in autistics is often accompanied by an egalitarian view that emphasizes fairness, equal treatment for everyone, and condemnation of unjust power moves by elites, attitudes which can compel autistics to be whistleblowers in cases of workplace wrongdoing (Lewis & Evans, 2021).

In order to break new theoretical ground by emphasizing positive aspects of autistic atypical sociality, we begin by listening to autistic voices. We examine a) edited books and memoirs from publishing houses, but also b) comments from self-identified autistic voices responding to the content of these books, and c) autistic conversations happening in social media discussion forums. We then examine published research relating to autistics' attitudes toward navigating social hierarchies. In what follows, we often state broad generalizations about two neurotypes: autistics vs. non-autistics, with the latter group identified as NTs, which is a convenient label. Within each group there is heterogeneity rather than homogeneity; generalizations are stated here for possible heuristic value in contributing to new ideas regarding autistic sociality.

Autistic Perspectives on Sociality: Select Findings

In what follows, we selected autistic writers and social media influencers who are well-known and whose work can be easily found in English with a simple internet search. Future work can expand on this to find lesser-known authors and those from outside English-speaking counties. We include different formats (advice books, memoirs, website, social media) to illustrate how common themes occur across these different formats. Star Ford's (2010) book, *A Field Guide to Earthlings*, characterizes neurotypical people (NTs) as status-oriented, even when presenting in an egalitarian manner. Ford's purpose is to raise awareness that outward cooperation often masks competition. Ford provides summary statements such as the following:

- NTs constantly battle each other's confidence, because they can, and because the most confident person wins. (p. 144)

- If you have been confused by their use of the word 'friend' try substituting in your mind the term 'strategic ally.' (p. 127)

- Even during small talk, NTs are performing a trial run where they reveal their points of manipulation and identity . . . (p. 79)

- Lying is considered normal . . . Since a main purpose of their communication is manipulation . . . (p. 132)

Autistic bloggers who reviewed the book also agreed that NTs are more status-oriented than autistics (e.g., Hofer 2022). As an example of the wide appeal of Ford's message, 72% of Amazon reviews are 5-star, with the remaining reviews distributed across the 5-point rating scale. The Amazon reviewers frequently self-identified as autistic, declared the book to be helpful, and agreed with Ford's position, as revealed in online discussions about the book.

We now turn to Frank L. Ludwig, an autistic poet, photographer and independent scholar. In online essay, Ludwig (2021) proposed a "neurological spectrum that ranges from individual identity to collective identity," further suggesting that an autistic person usually "acts based on their individual judgment" Ludwig illustrates autistic dislike of social hierarchy via a short story about an autistic community founded on principles of horizontal individualism. In the story, an escaped convict, representing NT values, flees to an off-shore island and is surprised to be welcomed in a matter-of-fact manner while being invited to perform skill-congruent, useful work. The convict, Caspar, feels that being a menial worker would damage his social standing. He would have loved to tell the others that he was an important billionaire. When Caspar is arrested later in the story, he protests, "But I thought you were my friends." Here Ludwig implies that the NT definition of friendship is really 'strategic ally.' A strategic ally may be expected to protect you even if you break the law.

On the other hand, the characters who alerted authorities responded:

> We were . . . until we realized that you enrich yourself at the expense of others . . . you committed tax fraud . . . shun your responsibility to society . . . pile up money that doesn't serve any purpose other than boosting your overblown ego . . .

Two autistic-authored memoirs, *Odd-girl Out* (James, 2017) and *Pretending to Be Normal* (Holliday, 1999) discuss the alien qualities of popularity and in-group favoritism among high school girls. For example, Holliday recounted her excitement when a group of popular girls invited her to go to a shopping mall. At the mall, the girls clambered out of Holliday's car, thanked her, and cheekily informed her when to return to the mall entrance to drive them home.

Forum posts with items relevant to status competition are daily aired on Reddit and Quora. The argument has been made that forums offer valuable content to researchers (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Caldwell-Harris et al., 2023). We list here two posts about autistic people's difficulty with hierarchy.

Question: What do you personally like the most about [having autism], and what don't you like?

Answer: Not conforming to the hivemind/groupthink and seeing that the emperor has no clothes; being bothered by illogical group dynamics and detesting rude people (they are rude, because they think you are below them, while I think social hierarchies are usually not based on truths).

Question: Why can't some people with Asperger's hold paid jobs?

Answer 1: . . . a very hard worker, caught on very fast and never had negative reviews or feedback . . . So why I could never hold a job? I do not like rumors or gossip and am very uncomfortable being a part of it . . . I have a difficult time lying about anything more than a harmless white lie. If . . . employees maliciously gossip, puts me in situations where I have to lie for them.

Answer 2: Like many people with Asperger's, I find a lot of the rules people set, as well as most social norms, to be incredibly nonsensical. "It's just what we do" isn't a good enough reason for me to do something other people are doing, especially if I can clearly see there's a better way.

Future research could examine specific employment contexts where employee gossip and white lies are part of workplace culture, extending current workplace studies (Booth, 2016). Reddit and Quora also have public forums on employment which make no reference to neurodivergence. These presumably NT posters frequently complain about hierarchy and nonsensical workplace rules, indicating some continuity across neurotypes. However, a growing research literature confirms that hierarchy and non-sensical rules are obstacles for autistic employees (e.g., Booth, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2021; Remington et al., 2022).

Also arguing for a distinct autistic sociality is the Autistic Collaboration, a pro-neurodiversity organization:

> One of the persistent negative stereotypes is that we are poor at collaboration . . . Autistic people learn and play differently, and only have a limited (if any!) interest in competitive social games. We communicate and enjoy ourselves by sharing information and knowledge, and not by negotiating social status. . . . Autistic people are often noted for their honesty, their naivety, and their inability to be exploitative. The lack of self-promotional ability is typically at odds with cultural expectations.

Status-seeking has recently been discussed by autistic psychologists and videographers on TikTok. Shackleton-Jones (2023) noted that in workplace meeting, NTs seek to promote their presence early on in the meeting; if attendees fail to do this, they will be ignored later; he called this the need to "stake out your territory." Autistic psychologist Joey Lawrence (2023) notes that autistics want everyone to be held to the same moral standards, while NTs are willing to allow higher status people to have power, allowing them to be above the law and pay less for violating rules. Likewise, TikToker Lanna (2023) theorizes that many autistics have justice sensitivity, which includes the feeling that moral rules should be applied to everyone equally. Lanna pointed out that this is referred to as "moral rigidity" in research, but notes this is a positive trait, and need to be regarded as moral integrity.

Not all autistics avoid hierarchy. An example from online discussion forums is autistics' desire to enroll in the military and appearing to find hierarchy in the military acceptable. The relative frequency of acceptance vs. rejection of hierarchy remains to be systematically studied by researchers. In the next section, we document themes from what research currently exists.

Reputation, Non-Conformity, and Moral Reasoning

We found no research directly on status-seeking in autism, or on competing for status. We therefore review three related topics: how one is viewed by

others (concern for reputation), non-conformity, and moral reasoning. Each is explored in the section that follows.

Reputation Management
Reputation management is a topic adjacent to status-navigation, but the research on it is informative regarding status seeking. Autistics are frequently victims of peer bullying, which is often attributed to reduced perspective-taking and poor social skills, which themselves are assumed to stem from mentalizing deficits (Mallory; 2014; Wainscot et al., 2008). An alternative (or additional) view is suggested by our current thesis. If autistics have reduced interest in social status, they may be indifferent to who is high status in their peer group, may not defer sufficiently to high-status peers, or may not be strategic about building a social network that will protect them from peer aggression. Consistent with this, a growing literature demonstrates that autistics invest less in reputation management (Chevallier et al., 2014; Frith & Frith, 2011; Izuma et al., 2011; Tennie, Frith & Frith, 2009). For example, using the dictator game, autistics failed to show a typical audience effect, being equally generous when unobserved as when observed (Chevallier et al., 2014). Autistics were also less strategic than NTs in presenting a positive image when describing themselves (Scheeren et al., 2010).

Interviews with autistic adolescents revealed that although some were concerned about reputation, many reported they didn't want to be 'cool' (Cage, Bird & Pellicano, 2016). Sometimes the reason for this was that they did not understand the rules of being cool, or had difficulty in coping with the unpredictability of social rules. But some autistic teens rejected being cool, favoring the need to be true to oneself. This avoidance of managing an acceptable presentation is consistent with rejection of social game-playing.

Non-Conformity
Several studies demonstrate the resistance of autistic children to social pressure. Using the classic Asch task of judging the sizes of lines, autistic children were much less likely to conform in the misleading condition than typically developing children (Yafai et al., 2014). In addition, autism traits measured in typically developing children negatively correlated with the likelihood of conforming. Degree of autistic traits (but not an autism diagnosis) was associated with reduced peer conformity when responding to vignettes (Verrier et al., 2020). These studies are consistent with Ludwig's

characterization of autistic sensibility discussed previously. However, in a related test of conformity involving memory, autistic adults were as likely as controls to alter their responses to align with answers supposedly given by four other individuals. The memory task involved identifying which words had been previously seen. Yafai et al. (2014) conclude: "autistic individuals and controls are equally susceptible to social influence when reporting their memories."

These discrepancies in conformity needs to be investigated in future research, but we note here one explanation for conflicting findings. The task of Yafai et al. (2014) involved reporting a visible stimulus, while the task of Lazzaro et al. (2019) requires memory retrieval. It is plausible that autistics prefer to believe their own eyes and ignore obviously wrong choices made by others, but when the task involves memory, it may be a logical decision to trust the reports of four others.

Consistent with the nonconformity findings, one study found that over-imitation was reduced in autistic children (Marsh et al, 2013). Over-imitation means following details of a procedure even if those details are irrelevant to the goal, such as finding a food reward or making a toy produce an interesting sound. Marsh et al. (2013) explain reduced over-imitation as due to autistic children's social difficulties. However, less over-imitation fits with trust in one's own senses and a logical approach to obtaining goals. In a provocative finding, Hu et al. (2021) reported that autistic adults were less willing to take a bribe, and pathologized this admirable trait as a theory of mind deficit. Resistance to bribery is compatible with reduced conformity and sticking to one's own sense of right and wrong.

Moral Reasoning
The deficit perspective is that mentalizing deficiencies limit autistics' moral reasoning (e.g., Senland & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). However, autistics were broadly similar to NTs when determining whether actors were morally right or wrong (moral judgment), as determined by a systematic review of moral psychology in autism (Dempsey et al., 2019). Autistics may nonetheless have unique moral reasoning. In a recent qualitative interview with six autistic adults, autistic adults emphasized the moral foundations of care and fairness more than they endorsed loyalty and authority (Dempsey et al., 2020). Although those authors do *not* emphasize this point, scrutinizing

author-provided quotes from interviewees revealed moral reasoning consistent with rejection of status hierarchies, rejection of authority, preference for egalitarian interactions, and sympathy for low-status and out-group individuals (Table 1).

Table 1. Quotes *Relevant to Reduced Status-seeking* (Dempsey et al. , 2020)	
Dislike of Hierarchy	And the law doesn't affect [the ruling party] at all.
	A very small group of people [make] these decisions that are going to make things really awful for people in the future . . . they don't have any right to choose those consequences for other people.
	Which society actually created male domination or masculinity anyway? Which society actually decided that men can have all this power?
Wariness of Authority	Authority figures have special responsibilities that they are morally bound to fulfill.
	My whole family has had issues with authority figures.
	I don't hold respect for people just because they're an authority figure. They have to show me respect too.
Preference for Egalitarian Society	Society definitely has the capacity to provide everyone with their basic needs but we're not doing that.
	People can be very judgmental. We need to get past our own bias and we need to stop comparing other people to a sort of standard that we have
	Human equality is important regardless of 'gender, sexual orientation, ethnicities, [or] nationality'.
	Sometimes disabled people are commodified to bolster others' fame or prestige through.
	It is morally wrong to separate migrant families.

The cause of reduced status-seeking remains to be systematically studied. We review three possible explanations: 1) An outcome of reduced social motivation 2) An emergent property of monotropism and special interests 3) A consequence of deliberative cognitive style and 4) Enhanced motivation to engage in egalitarian interactions. We review these briefly while noting that each deserves a more comprehensive treatment.

An Outcome of Reduced Social Motivation
Social motivation may be slightly down-regulated for autistic people (Chevallier et al., 2012) or altered in ways that are not well understood (Dawson & Cowen 2019). If social rewards are less important for autistic people, that sets in motion a cascade of influences on learning and development. In this view, reduced status-seeking is a consequence of reduced interest in the social world, although not an absence of interest (see Jiswal, 2019 for arguments that autistic people do not lack social motivation).

An Emergent Property of Monotropism and Special Interests
Monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) refers to a cognitive style in which attention is focused on a domain of high interest. Monotropism's attentional tunneling may sometimes resemble local processing bias by prioritizing local details. However, Murray et al. (2005, p. 141) note that with monotropism, "local processing does not necessarily take precedence over global. There may be no problems in integrating information when it is attended to."

For autistic people without intellectual disabilities, interests are typically informational, and are opportunities for systemizing information, knowledge seeking, and learning new ideas (Caldwell-Harris & Jordan, 2014). NT interests and hobbies overlap with autistic special interests but are more likely to be venues for socializing. Interests that encourage socializing are sports, food/drink, and music (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012). Special interests may not initially seem relevant to lack of interest in social hierarchy, but people choose how to direct their limited attentional resources. We argue, consistent with Murray et al., (2005), that autistic people can pursue social goals, but informational goals are prioritized. Monotropic attentional focus is thus not ideal for extracting regularities and patterns in the social world. Learning social skills may thus take longer than would be the case for a neurotype that can integrate fuzzy, diffuse regularities. An example is Temple Grandin's (2008) report that she learned eye contact in her forties.

A Consequence of Deliberative Cognitive Style
Autistic persons have a cognitive style that emphasizes logical reasoning, deliberation and systemizing (Baron-Cohen, 2022; Rozenkrantz, et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2020). A topic often discussed in the autism community is autistic people's special interests in science and scholarly topics, and their logical and intellectual approach to daily life topics (Caldwell-Harris &

Jordan, 2014). Rozenkrantz et al. (2021) review the literature on how autistic individuals are less susceptible to common reasoning biases that have long been studied by cognitive psychologists, such as the conjunction fallacy, sunk-cost bias, and framing effect. Those authors explained enhanced rationality in autistic individuals as due to their greater attention to deliberation and reduced use of intuition. Diverse aspects of deliberative cognitive style in autism are also reviewed in Ashwin and Brosnan (2019), Morsayni and Byrne (2019) and South et al. (2014).

A cognitive style that prioritizes logical reasoning means that competing for social status can seem illogical, because the benefits of status are amorphous and status itself may be opposed to one's other values, such as obtaining proficient knowledge or being a kind person. Status pursuit may also seem wrong because it sometimes requires exploiting others or breaking rules, as described by autistic authors Ford (2010) and Ludwig (2021). Avoiding status-seeking is a logical route to avoiding unethical behavior and too-flexible rule-breaking. The benefits include:

- Not getting tied up with morally questionable activities, such as those requiring rule-bending and nuanced moral justification.

- Prioritizing time for one's own interests.

- Having the satisfaction of avoiding activities that one does not value.

- Enhanced motivation to engage in egalitarian interactions

Increasing hominid group size during evolution led to increased social complexity, making hierarchy more beneficial (Dunbar 2004). This required attention to maintaining one's status, and attention to social norms. Recent cross-cultural research does not portray force and/or trickery as the routes to status. Instead, leaders strive to provide benefits to others (see Durkee et al., 2020). This implies that caution about leaders and desire for win-win relationships are of central concerns to humans.

One could posit that an inherent property of autism is having an egalitarian, anti-hierarchical stance. On this view, autistic people are socially motivated, as described by Jaswal and Akhtar (2019), but their social attention is oriented

towards families, friends, and general socializing (Dawson & Cowen, 2019). Having an inherently egalitarian motivation is consistent with research discussed earlier, that many autistic people are hyper-empathic, feel strongly about justice, doing what is right, and being fair to everyone (Dempsey et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021). Integrating the factors above, we propose that avoiding status-seeking is multiply determined for autistic people. This value thus might emerge for many autistic people even despite having diverse backgrounds and characteristics.

Implications

The perspective developed here could inform persons who mentor autistic youth regarding difficulties with popularity contests in high school and wanting to do what's right in the workplace by being a whistleblower or reporting violations and consequently suffering retaliations. What is common acrossthese otherwise distinct phenomena is that each contains a double message, where an official message is at odds with a subtext. With popularity and cliques among teenage peers, the official message is that one wins friends by being kind, loyal and helpful. The reality is that becoming popular involves exclusion, coercion, and using one's personal capital (whether it be looks, money, charisma, or other resources) to control other's attention (Hawley, 2014). In the workplace, the official message is to follow rules and report violations, thus serving the greater good. The unofficial reality is that powerful people and corporations will punish those who report their wrongdoing, so it is better off to keep your head down and confront power cautiously.

At present, stake holders attribute social difficulties with mentalizing deficits. But an orientation towards egalitarian relations can also cause challenges when living in a status-conscious society. Understanding autistic vs. NT differences in navigating social hierarchies may also shed light on factors creating awkward communication between the neurotypes (Milton, 2012; Morrison et al., 2019).

Future Research

The autistic sociality theory we advance in this article could be tested experimentally using a story method; in which scenarios pit the following

two factors against each other: the desire to conform to authority figures' norms to win their high regard and attain higher social status, and caring about the well-being of a human being, following one's own values or conscience.

Consider the example of witnessing the hazing of new recruits when one is a sorority (or fraternity) member. Looking good in the eyes of sorority elites means suppressing the desire to help the hazed recruit (with support, food, and relief from hazing). Caring less about the high regard of the elites allows natural human empathy to guide action. We predict autistic individuals will be more likely to help the hazed recruit. In other words, it is an open question as to whether autistic individuals would respond as NTs did in classical social psychology studies (which are ethically prohibited from being replicated today) such as those conducted by Milgram on obedience to authority or Zimbardo on deindividuation (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 1969)

Likewise, managers sometimes face the difficult decision of ensuring fair treatment for their employees at the cost of their own career advancement. Autistic and NT managers can be interviewed to determine what they have done (or would do) in these situations. Researchers can administer tests of status-seeking, or acceptance of social hierarchy, such as the Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto et al., 1994). A related idea is to interview persons with autism who have attained high social status and compare them to neurotypicals with similar status.

A real-world example of this concerns environmental and economic justice movements. Allegiance to middle-class and upper-middle-class norms can require minimizing activism for social change (or rationalizing inequality using strategies documented by social psychologists such as the just world hypothesis; Lerner, 1980). Depending on other aspects of their personality, some autistic individuals may choose to be "class traitors" and stick to the logic of what is right for humanity rather than pursuing individual achievement. Future research can investigate autistic persons' support for social justice movements, or for environmental causes, as in the example of Greta Thunberg (Ben-Asher, 2022).

The large body of literature (e.g., Durkee et al. 2020) on how people learn about and navigate status clues should also be scrutinized to examine what

aspects are more or less congruent with the typical traits of autistic people. Some autistics may invest energy in horizontal relationships but can fall into the trap of fawning and difficulty in setting boundaries. Insufficient vigilance about harm from others has the advantage of seeing the positive aspects of others but makes people vulnerable to exploitation. Future research can explore how a distinct autistic approach to hierarchy has both advantages and disadvantages (as in Spikins 2009).

Conclusions

Autism has been traditionally viewed as composed of a varying number of deficits. Following a strength-based approach, recent researchers have consulted autistic perspectives to find authentic characterizations of autistic abilities. Autistic voices and scholars have been embraced in paradigms such as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), which examines the specific domain of communicating within vs. between neurotypes. A related domain was scrutinized here: navigating social hierarchies.

We assembled an autistic perspective on social hierarchy by listening to autistic voices on internet forums, an autistic organizations' mission statement, and published memoirs and books. We summarized these views as converging on a common theme: reduced interest in competing for social status. Emphasizing equality and rejecting authority is also relevant to the double-empathy problem (Milton, 2012). Autistic people are reluctant to establish power relations via social rituals that involve testing and judgment using the open-ended, dynamically changing game of making small talk; since they frequently do not endorse the logic of social hierarchy in the first place.

Some published research already supports our proposal. We cited findings that autistic people are less invested in reputation management, more likely to resist conformity, favor moral systems which reject authority, and prefer egalitarian interactions. We also described possible mechanisms for reduced status-seeking, including monotropism and deliberative cognitive style.

This perspective on autistic social orientation explains autistic strengths while acknowledging observed difficulties. Reduced status seeking allows autistic people to excel by acquiring and sharing their knowledge in specific

arenas, independently of power-seeking. However, autistic people may be insufficiently wary about the dangers of thwarting larger power structures. Mentors can learn how to assist autistic individuals to capitalize on strengths while avoiding dangers.

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