

Advertisement

News

Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle

More

The Observer
Society

Will Storr

Sun 29 Aug 2021 11.00 BST

We all play the status game, but who are the real winners?



▲ High society: 'When we join any group, we have an automatic tendency to identify high-status members and copy their beliefs, tastes and behaviours.' Illustration: Nathalie Lees/The Observer

Life is a game. To understand this is to understand why the human world can be so maddening, angry and irrational. The behaviour of racists, transphobes, conspiracy theorists, cult members, religious fundamentalists and online mobbers becomes much more explicable when you realise that humans are

Advertisement

programmed by evolution to be obsessively interested in status, and that this obsession is

powerful enough to overcome the will to achieve equality, truth or the sense of generous compassion for our rivals.

We play games for status incessantly and automatically. We do so because it's a solution our species has come upon to secure our own survival and reproduction. As a tribal animal, our survival has always depended on our being accepted into a supportive community. But once inside any group, we're rarely content to flop about on its lower rungs. We're driven to rise within it. Back in the stone age, increased status meant access to better mates, more food and greater safety for ourselves and our offspring. The more status we earned, the greater our capacity to thrive and produce thriving children. So we're driven to seek connection and rank, to be accepted into groups and win status within them. This is the game of human life.

No matter where you might travel, from the premodern societies of Papua New Guinea to the skyscraper forests of Tokyo and Manhattan, you'll find it: humans forming groups and playing for status. In the developed world, we play political games, religious games, corporate games, sports games, cult games, legal games, fashion games, hobby games, video games, charity games, social media games, racial, gender and nationalist games. The variety feels infinite. Within these groups we strive for individual status, for acclaim from our co-players. But our groups also compete with rival groups in status contests: corporation battles corporation, football team battles football team. When our teams win status, we do too. When they lose, so do we. These games form our identity. We become the games we play. They're built into our brains, part of how we experience reality. It's simply not possible to opt out of it. But we can decide which games we choose to play.

As a 46-year-old, I've often felt self-conscious about my age and its various signs. Since completing my research, I've realise these signs are symbols used to measure status in a

Most viewed



British 'baby shortage' could lead to economic decline, says thinktank



Justin Trudeau's bid for third term in balance as Canada goes to polls



Violinist Nigel Kennedy cancels concert after Classic FM stops Hendrix tribute



Japan urges Europe to speak out against China's military expansion



'It's heartbreaking': Steve McCurry on Afghan Girl, a portrait of past and present

signs are symbols used to measure status in a game I'm no longer required to play. Competing with the young in games of youth is not just hopeless, it's dull. The trick is to find new games. There are different worlds to explore in the second half of life - most more meaningful than those of the first.

And there are so many to choose from. Humans are extraordinarily imaginary creatures who use almost anything to symbolise status: money, Twitter followers, literary tastes, power, the brand of a watch or the shape of a stomach. In 1948 the anthropologist William Bascom published an account of a status game on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei that was played with yams. The man with the largest yam at a feast would be declared "Number One" and praised by the chief for his generosity. The men of Pohnpei would furiously compete for this position, raising around 50 yams a year in secret, remote, overgrown plots that they'd creep out of bed at two in the morning to tend to. A single yam could take 10 years to grow, reach more than 4m in length, weigh over 90kg and require 12 men to carry into the feast using a stretcher.

Just as yam-growing gave the men of Pohnpei access to a status game and its precious rewards of connection and acclaim, so belief allows access to the games of religion, politics, cults and conspiracies - the more fervently you believe, the higher you rise. Covid-19 has shown the craziness that can erupt out of these dynamics. Against all apparent logic, the pandemic that's killed more than four million worldwide hasn't also wiped out belief in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. By one [estimate](#), more than five million Britons cling to anti-vax beliefs.



▲ Game of life: 'We play political games, sports games, racial, gender and nationalist games.' Illustration: Nathalie Lees/The Observer

Acceptance of a symbolic belief allows access into the anti-vax game, but gaining significant status within it requires *active belief* - allowing the belief to possess you, and fighting for it out in the world. Such a process overwhelmed a young Pennsylvanian mother, Maranda Dynda, after she joined a social media group. She was 18 and pregnant, and her midwife encouraged her not to vaccinate her child. Concerned and confused, Dynda went to Google and typed in: "Why not vaccinate?" She immediately tumbled into an oubliette of irrationality, finally landing in Facebook.

"Facebook was the big one," she said. "You find a Facebook group, join it and it sucks you in." She was impressed by the strong female warriors she found in an anti-vax forum. "I grew up in a family of women. And I thought, look at all these mothers, these experienced women I'm surrounded by! I don't know what I'm doing and they all know what they're doing. Imagine you're a kid who wants to be a firefighter and you visit a fire station and you see all the big, strong firefighters. You think, I want to be just like them. I wanted to be a cool, strong Mom who takes this knowledge I've suddenly gained and uses it for my benefit, my child's benefit, the world's benefit."

Her indoctrination was rapid. "You're socially rewarded for going with the group," she said.

“It’s Facebook likes, it’s comments like, ‘yeah way to go Mom, you’re so strong, you’re so smart, you’re doing the best thing.’” Soon, Dynda was out in the world, playing her new status game with enthusiasm, evangelising. “You want to bring it up with people you can argue with, because you want to be like, I’m smarter than you, I know more than you do.” Was part of the point of this to report back to the group, for status rewards? “That’s absolutely accurate. You were rewarded for that. The louder you were, the more unmovable you were, the higher you moved up socially.”

Dynda has since become a vaccine advocate. A wealth of evidence from psychologists and anthropologists supports her observations of her time playing the anti-vax game. When we join any group, we have an automatic tendency to identify high-status members and copy their beliefs, tastes and behaviours. We do this partly as a gameplay strategy: by blindly adopting the opinions and habits of the successful, we hope to become successful ourselves.

But it would be a mistake to conclude from all this that status pursuit is purely a curse. On the contrary, almost everything we think of as “good” in the world is underpinned by the mechanisms of the game. In the small, mobile bands in which our brains did much of their evolution, we won prestige by showing ourselves to be beneficial to the group. We could do this by demonstrating virtue (being generous, dutiful or courageous) or by being competent (a great hunter, honey finder or storyteller). Still today, we award prestige to those who are conspicuously virtuous or successful. The joy of status is nature’s bribe that tempts us into being useful.

// The men of the island of Pohnpei fought to be number one yam-grower

Just as status pursuit drives anti-vax protests, it drives movements that truly change the world. The Industrial Revolution was launched out of thousands of status games. Britain of the time was an “associational world”, according to historian Peter Clark. Ambitious innovators met at clubs, conversation societies and coffee

metal clubs, conversation societies and coffee houses and founded learned organisations. The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce began in a London coffee house and gave out cash prizes or medals to its members. It still exists today, better known as the Royal Society of Arts. All these groups were games, motivating their members to reach for ever greater heights of genius with the infinitely precious rewards of connection and acclaim.

Status's capacity to drive innovation is evident in the story of the iPhone. Former Apple executive Scott Forstall has recalled how Steve Jobs kept meeting a Microsoft executive at social functions. This man boasted Microsoft had "solved computing" with a tablet device that was operated with a special pen. "Any time Steve had any social interaction with that guy, Steve would come back pissed off," said Forstall. "That guy shoved it in Steve's face, the way they were going to rule the world with their tablets with pens. Steve came in Monday and there was a set of expletives and then it was like, 'Let's show them how it's really done.'" The device that resulted became the iPhone. "It began because Steve hated this guy. That's the actual origin of it," said Forstall. "It was not good for Microsoft that Steve ever met this guy."

In today's strange and rageful online-mediated neoliberal world, we're continually offered new and shifting symbols of what it is to be a winner: thinner, larger, whiter, darker, smarter, happier, brave-and-sadder with *this* career triumph and *that* many likes. When it becomes overwhelming, it's useful to remind ourselves that these symbols we chase are often no less ridiculous than giant yams and that none of us are competing with everyone in the world, no matter how much it can feel that way. The great consolation of the game is that it's not final victory we should seek in order to be happy, but simple, humble progress: the never-ending pleasure of moving in the right direction. Nobody wins the status game. They're not supposed to. The meaning of life is not to win, it's to play.

The Status Game, by Will Storr, is published by William Collins on 2 September at £20

William Collins on 2 September at 220

... as you're joining us today from the Netherlands, we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian's high-impact journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million readers, from 180 countries, have recently taken the step to support us financially - keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we can set our own agenda and provide trustworthy journalism that's free from commercial and political influence, offering a counterweight to the spread of misinformation. When it's never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, Guardian journalism is available for everyone to read, regardless of what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of global events, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action.

We aim to offer readers a comprehensive, international perspective on critical events shaping our world - from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the new American administration, Brexit, and the world's slow emergence from a global pandemic. We are committed to upholding our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as €1 - it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in November

