Social climbing: The effects of social hierarchy on groups and their members.
By Nicholas Hays

Social hierarchy is all around us; companies use organizational charts to convey the relative power and importance of employees, consumers choose goods ranging from cars to clothing to demonstrate their social status, and colleagues trade barbs during meetings to assert their expertise and intellectual superiority. I present three studies representative of my research on the effects of these ubiquitous power and status hierarchies on groups and their members. Each study examines either the factors that motivate individuals to seek power or status, the consequences of such efforts, or both. One study demonstrates that status hierarchy dispersion, defined as the level of status inequality that exists in a group, motivates individuals to move up in the hierarchy, which causes them to seek greater status by asserting their capabilities to contribute to group goals. A second study finds that when groups experience conflicts about members’ relative status, the group’s performance suffers. A third study demonstrates that people psychologically latch on to trivial and fleeting associations with powerful others so that they can feel more powerful themselves. However, consistent with research showing that men are more motivated to feel powerful than women, we only observe this effect among male participants. Taken together, my research indicates that people are often motivated to climb the social hierarchies of which they a part, but their level of motivation is dependent on individual and situational factors.