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Part 1 of Two Parts

Is Life Just a Search for Status? Part I: Dominant Baboons and British Civil Servants

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Bonjour. I am in Bordeaux. Over the screen of my laptop, a beautiful swimming pool is visible. A gleaming new car stands beside it.

Today it is raining gently. But that has one advantage. It offers time to think.

In my view, 80% of all expenditure in life -- on cars and swimming pools, say -- is an attempt to buy status. On vacation you notice how people spend their money. Yet most of us do not think deeply about why we truly make purchases.

I currently have an excellent Swedish car. Although it is only four years old, my mind turns more and more to parting with my glamorous Swede and buying the latest model, or possibly purchasing a well-known German make. But why do I? The change would take twenty thousand pounds out of my bank account in return for, well, almost nothing. My present car works perfectly. A new one would be no faster, no quieter, no more comfortable, and no more economical or spacious. Yet I still think about switching. Like other human beings, I apparently care about rank, status and hierarchy. It is not conscious. But it must be there, deep down.

Economists do not think hard enough about human beings' need for status. Our textbooks ignore it. Medical researchers, in contrast, have been making interesting discoveries. They have found that it is rational for people to be obsessed with rank and hierarchy. Success has profound consequences for how well your body functions.

If you want to live to be 100, get promoted to the top at work. Higher status makes people healthier and gives greater longevity. This is

now standard knowledge among epidemiologists. But it is probably not widely known among the public.

Early evidence about the medical effects of status came from a study of retired male civil servants. Remarkably, how senior the men had become in the Civil Service proved to be a good predictor of when they would die. The Sir Humphreys and other high-ranking individuals survived into their 80s. The fairly high-ranking men died in their 70s. Those men who made it only to clerical positions died off in their 60s. Lack of success at work is, literally, a life sentence. Since then, scientists have found more and more evidence of what they call psychosocial pathways to health.

At first, some researchers were sceptical. They argued that, while the statistical correlation in the Civil Service study was impressive, it was probably just because low-ranking workers ate in a less healthy way and smoked too much. Yet we now understand that this is the wrong explanation.

A new study, termed The Whitehall 2 Project, is being done. It is following 17,000 civil servants through time. Employment grade has again turned out to be a powerful predictor of premature death. Classic 'risk' factors of early death are smoking, high blood pressure, and being overweight. Even factoring out all these influences, a person's seniority at work remains the single best predictor of long life. Research has also found that you can improve your health by, first, making sure you have a strong social network and plenty of friends and, second, by having a job where you have control over what you do and how quickly.

So, if you get promoted, why exactly would you become healthier and more likely to have a long life? Could the correlation between job rank and longevity be spurious and merely because strong, resilient people are the ones who become senior workers? No. Evidence for a biological mechanism by which status affects health has, in fact, recently been uncovered.

Researchers measured the blood cholesterol of civil servants with different ranks. Intriguingly, there was a linear relationship with the seniority of the individual. This is important, because it is known that

cholesterol is correlated with heart disease, and cardiovascular disease is the biggest premature killer of men.

Studies of the animal kingdom have also been done. These manipulate the rank of animals in their group, and show that it alters the animals' actual physiology.

One study looked at social dominance among baboons in the Serengeti. First, those at the head of the monkey packs were just like senior British civil servants. They had the best cholesterol levels. Levels of cardiovascular damage were also shown to be related to how far up the pack's social hierarchy the animal lay – as in civil servants. Second, by using different diets and other methods, researchers experimentally changed which baboons were dominant in their packs. Dominant animals that became subordinate had a five-fold rise in the dangerous blood plaque levels which are known to predict premature death and heart disease. Baboons that became dominant showed marked improvements in their blood plaque levels.

Some analysts have argued that governments should take this evidence seriously, and design policy differently. Inequality's repercussions, for instance, could be worse than is often thought. It puts folk into their graves more quickly. There is evidence that rich countries with high inequality have shorter life-spans. But, so far, governments have not listened.

Next month I shall study status in the sun -- writing from Biarritz and St Tropez. It is a tough job but someone has to do it.