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**HETHER WE HAVE** our sights set on being King of the Geeks or having the cash and cachet to score an invitation to a royal wedding, we all strive for status in one form or another. But when a person's primary goal is arriving at the upper crust, no amount of prestige will make him happy.

"The hedonic-treadmill theory says every time you achieve a goal, you set your sights on the next one," says Art Markman, a University of Texas psychologist and *PT* blogger. "If your main goal is high status, you won't enjoy it once you're there."

The drive to get ahead of the Joneses is rooted in the days when our place in the pecking order determined whether we had a full belly, a quality mate, and a shot at living to old age. But basic instinct doesn't explain why some leave claw marks on their fellow humans in a relentless clamber to the top, even to their own detriment.

Extreme ladder-scaling may stem from a combo of low self-esteem, psychopathology, and an extreme tendency toward self-comparison. America's rags-to-riches motif may also spur climbing, but not necessarily of the ruthless variety. Says Markman: "The presence of social mobility gives people other avenues to increase their status that are based on merit rather than scheming."

[ FIELD GUIDE TO THE... ]

## Social Climber

By Jill Coody Smits

**Latin Name:** *Covetus Rankium*

**Notable Characteristics:** Takes notes while watching *Gossip Girl*; drops the names of local A-listers whenever possible; scans the room for bigger fish while chatting at parties; can be found at soirees and benefits stalking the society page photographer.

**Songs & Calls:** "Oh, I don't hang out with *them* anymore." "One day, I'll be your boss." "Who's going to be there?"

# “Toe-crushers have an understanding of how groups are constructed and who’s friends with whom.”

Et tu, Brute?

**CASE STUDY:**  
**The Toe-Crusher**  
*(Covetus rankium steponyx)*

YOU’VE BEEN ENCOUNTERING the backstabber since the sixth-grade class election, when your opponent told everyone you still had a teddy bear (lies!). Now, that vicious Brutus is in the next cube over, whispering about your ineptitude and claiming your work for his own.

The toe-crusher’s weapon is high relational aggression—which is linked with narcissism and envy as well as low self-esteem. It also correlates with high social intelligence, which enables backstabbers to manipulate as they deem necessary, says Brigham Young University psychologist Sarah Coyne. “Toe-crushers have a deep understanding of how groups are constructed and who’s friends with whom,” she says.

Some researchers call this personality type Machiavellian, and those categorized as “high Mach” have flexible morals, prize goal attainment over relationships, and hold a cynical view of human nature. “Most of us would feel guilty taking credit for someone else’s work,” says Markman, “but others redefine their actions as OK because ‘he had it coming’ or ‘the end justifies the means.’”

While nastiness may pay off in junior high, adults won’t tolerate it for long. If one person attempts to ascend a hierarchy through force or manipulation, the rest of the group will fend him off, research from psychologist Cameron Anderson at the Haas School of Business indicates. “We’re better off when someone with a stronger group-orientation who’s actually talented takes charge,” he says. “Members tend to join together to block bullies from becoming the alpha.”



**CASE STUDY:**  
**The Brown-Noser**  
*(Covetus rankium obsequiosis)*

THE SIMPSON’S MR. Smithers, Lord Voldemort’s Wormtail, *Pride and Prejudice*’s simpering Mr. Collins: Immune to others’ shudders, gagging, and eye rolls, the brown-noser will say or do just about anything to ingratiate himself to a villainous boss, a dark lord, Lady Catherine De Bourgh—whoever is perceived to be at the top of a social pyramid.

Some social climbers suck up because, well, it frequently works. “Status in any group is based on two primary things: what you can bring to the table and how much you are willing to self-sacrifice,” Anderson explains. “Being obsequious signals the second quality.”

If you suspect your ingratiating neighbor’s repeated offers to clear the resident diva’s snowy sidewalk eventually scored her a spot at the cool kid supper club—you’re probably onto something. Says Markman, “There’s a lot of tit for tat in relationships; if someone walks into a situation and it’s not obvious what they can provide, sucking up may be the best option.”

Brown-nosers have something else working in their favor: People are saps for flattery. While observers can instantly spot a sycophant’s M.O., the recipient laps it up even if she has very high self-regard. According to a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, when you are the object of effusiveness, you fail to recognize the brown-nosing not out of vanity but rather from a desire to be liked and admired.



**CASE STUDY:**  
**The Gold Digger**  
*(Covetus rankium opportunistalis)*

LONG BEFORE MADONNA gloated about the fine art of being a material girl, writers and filmmakers immortalized the trope of the materialistic beauty. There’s a long cultural history of stereotyping (and often decrying) women who appear willing to trade youth, looks, and even sex for status and security. But the gold-digger backlash fails to acknowledge what women are wired to seek out: traits that signify an upward future trajectory in status, says David Buss, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas.

“Women prize qualities that are linked with resource acquisition and future status, like intelligence, drive, ambition, and industriousness,” Buss says. A successful, dependable mate, of course, helps ensure the survival of a woman’s offspring; the drive to secure one is inborn.

But what about the twentysomething who brags about the loot and vacations she’s scored from the millionaire “senior friend” she refers to as Daddy Warbucks? She’ll be the first to tell you she’s not in it for marriage or breeding. Markman says it again goes back to goals.

“Everything is a cost-benefit trade-off,” he says. “If you really want what money can buy, you might be willing to give up things like dating someone you actually love for what you feel is the grand prize.” Self-esteem may factor in: If a woman perceives herself as having nothing to offer but her good looks, Markman adds, she’s likely to offer it up in the transaction.