Why Status Matters for Inequality

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Abstract

To understand the mechanisms behind social inequality, this address argues that we need to more thoroughly incorporate the effects of status—inequality based on differences in esteem and respect—alongside those based on resources and power. As a micro motive for behavior, status is as significant as money and power. At a macro level, status stabilizes resource and power inequality by transforming it into cultural status beliefs about group differences regarding who is "better" (esteemed and competent). But cultural status beliefs about which groups are "better" constitute group differences as *independent* dimensions of inequality that generate material advantages due to group membership itself. Acting through micro-level social relations in workplaces, schools, and elsewhere, status beliefs bias evaluations of competence and suitability for authority, bias associational preferences, and evoke resistance to status challenges from low-status group members. These effects accumulate to direct members of higher status groups toward positions of resources and power while holding back lower status group members. Through these processes, status writes group differences such as gender, race, and class-based life style into organizational structures of resources and power, creating durable inequality. Status is thus a central mechanism behind durable patterns of inequality based on social differences.

Keywords

social status, interpersonal relations, inequality, gender, race, class

Sociologists want to do more than describe social inequality. We want to understand the deeper problem of how inequality is *made* and, therefore, could potentially be unmade. What are the mechanisms? How do we uncover them? To do this more effectively, I argue that we need to more thoroughly incorporate the effects of a relatively neglected form of social inequality—social status—alongside effects based on resources and power. To make my case, I will attempt to show how status acts as an *independent* force in the making of inequality based on gender, race, and class.

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At a broader level, I will argue that, in the search for mechanisms, we need to open up the traditional study of inequality in two key ways. First, we need to more thoroughly interrogate the nature of inequality itself to take into account its multidimensional complexity—that is, to examine its cultural as well as material dimensions and to incorporate group-based inequality, such as race and gender inequality, along with socioeconomic inequality. Second, we need to look across levels of analysis from the individual and interpersonal to the organizational to the macro-structural and cultural to discover how inequality processes at each level interpenetrate one another to create and sustain patterns of resource inequality. In my view, the most important mechanisms, the ones that have the most obdurate power to sustain broad patterns of inequality, often emerge from the systematic interaction of processes at multiple levels (see DiTomaso 2013; Reskin 2012; Ridgeway 2011). If we constrain our analyses to inequality processes at one level at a time, these multi-level mechanisms will continually elude our grasp. In what follows, we will see that an examination of the significance of social status for inequality illustrates each of these issues: the need to incorporate cultural as well as material processes, to take into account group difference-based inequality, and to link micro and macro processes.

We are all familiar with Weber's ([1918] 1968) classic analysis of three different but interrelated bases for inequality in industrial societies: resources, power, and status. Contemporary accounts of stratification in U.S. sociology focus primarily on resources and power. Control over resources and access to positions of power in organizations that produce and distribute resources are closely related processes that provide the material representation of inequality in society. But what about social status, which is inequality based on differences in honor, esteem, and respect (Weber [1918] 1968)? Status is often treated as a side topic in U.S. sociology, possibly because it is seen as the "weakest," or

least causally significant of Weber's three bases of inequality. That is, in contrast to resources and power, status is not seen as an *independent* mechanism by which inequality between individuals and groups is *made*.

This, I argue, is a major misjudgment that greatly limits our ability to understand how stratification actually works in an advanced industrial society like our own. At a micro level, it limits our understanding of what is at stake in social inequality. When we think of inequality as merely a structural struggle for power and resources, we forget how much people care about their sense of being *valued* by others and the society to which they belong—how much they care about public acknowledgement of their worth (Goode 1978). This is status. People care about status quite as intensely as they do money and power. Indeed, people often want money as much for the status it brings as for its exchange value. An airport shoe-shine man once asked me what I did. When I told him, he said, "My daughter wants to go to Stanford and be a physician. What I do is just for her; I want her to *be* someone." Now, what was that about? Power? Not so much. Money? Yes, a bit. But above all it is about *public recognition* of his daughter's social *worth*. It is about social status. Clearly, we cannot understand the fundamental human motivations that enter into the struggle for precedence that lies behind inequality if we do not also take into account status.

At a more macro level, treating status as a side topic limits our ability to understand how status-based social differences, such as gender and race, are woven into organizations of resources and power. It even limits our ability to fully understand how class itself is reproduced through organizations of resources and power (cf. Sayer 2005). I will focus here on this more macro aspect of why status matters, but as I do so, I want to keep in mind the micro aspect of how important status is as a motivation for individuals.

I believe there are two reasons why status processes have been difficult to digest for standard sociological accounts of stratification. One is that status, in contrast to resources

and power, is based primarily in *cultural* beliefs rather than directly on material arrangements. That is, status is based on widely shared beliefs about the social categories or "types" of people that are ranked by society as more esteemed and respected compared to others (Berger et al. 1977; Jackson 1998).[1] Second, these cultural status beliefs work their effects on inequality primarily at the *social relational level* by shaping people's expectations for themselves and others and their consequent actions in social contexts (Berger et al. 1977; Ridgeway and Nakagawa forthcoming). Both the culturalist and the micro-level aspects of status processes contrast with the materialist and structural level perspectives of most analyses of stratification, which typically focus on income, wealth, occupational structures, social mobility, and so on. Yet, to understand how patterns of inequality persist in an obdurate way, despite ongoing economic, technological, and social change, we have to understand the relationships between cultural status beliefs on the one hand and material organizations of resources and power on the other hand. This is a problem that my own research on status and the resilience of gender inequality forced me to confront (Ridgeway 2011).

In what follows, I first outline three broad reasons *why* status processes matter for the larger structure of inequality. I then shift to *how* status matters by describing three micro-level processes through which status independently creates material inequalities between people from different social groups. I give some attention to how these processes are similar and different for gender-, race-, and class-based status effects. Then, to illustrate the impact of these micro status processes on material (resource and power) outcomes, I offer examples from recent research that demonstrate such effects for gender, race, and class inequality.

WHY STATUS MATTERS

Why do cultural status beliefs about social differences—that is, evaluative beliefs about

contrasting categories or "types" of people—matter for inequality? There are three fundamental reasons. First, as Tilly (1998) pointed out, inequality based purely on organizational control of resources and power is inherently unstable. It gives rise to a constant struggle between dominant and subdominant individuals. To persist, that is, for inequality to become *durable inequality,* control over resources and power has to be consolidated with a categorical difference between people such as race, gender, or life style.

Why does this consolidation stabilize inequality? It does so because it transforms the situational control over resources and power into a *status difference* between "types" of people that are evaluatively ranked in terms of how diffusely "better" they are. Research shows that status beliefs develop quickly among people under conditions in which categorical difference is at least partially consolidated with material inequality. Specifically, status construction studies show that when control over resources in a social setting is correlated with a salient categorical difference (e.g., race), people quickly link the appearance of mastery in the situation that the resources create with the associated difference between types of people (Ridgeway et al. 2009; Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). In this way, among others, people form status beliefs that the "type" of people who have more resources (e.g., whites) are "better" than the "types" with fewer resources. Furthermore, because both advantaged and disadvantaged groups experience the apparent "superiority" of the advantaged "type," the resulting status beliefs are shared by dominants and subdominants alike, legitimating the inequality (Jackman 1994; Ridgeway and Correll 2006).

Contemporary U.S. status beliefs assert that people in a particular category, say whites, men, or the middle or upper class, are not only more respected but also presumed to be more *competent,* especially at what "counts most" in society, than are people in contrasting categories, such as people of color, women, or the working class (Cuddy, Fiske,

and Glick 2007; Fiske et al. 2002).[2] This presumption of greater competence implies that higher status people have fairly won their better jobs and higher incomes on the basis of their own superior merit. It thus provides an especially powerful form of legitimation in an ostensibly meritocratic society such as our own.

The second reason why status beliefs matter is that, by transforming mere control of resources into more essentialized differences among "types" of people, status beliefs fuel social perceptions of difference. Constructing status beliefs about what types of people are "better" drives us to focus on, exaggerate, and make broader, more systematic use of socially defined differences among us (Lamont 2012; Lamont and Fournier 1992). The categorical differences recruited to become status differences to stabilize inequality can be amplifications of preexisting differences like sex or ethnicity (Tilly 1998). But they can also be differences constructed entirely for the purpose of asserting the status superiority of the richer and more powerful, as in the case of class-based manners and life style (Bourdieu 1984; Weber [1918] 1968). Elites, for instance, signal their class status superiority through sophisticated speech, clothing, and tastes in art (Bourdieu 1984). Status processes thus mobilize the construction of culturally defined social differences on the one hand. On the other hand, high-status actors rely on difference, with its self-justifying implications about their own superiority, to stabilize their control over material inequality. In this way, status processes are deeply implicated in the making of obdurate patterns of inequality based on social differences.

This brings us to the third reason why status beliefs about social differences matter for inequality. Few sociologists would deny that status stabilizes resource and power inequalities, but that in itself does not make status an independent source of material inequality. However, the development of status beliefs about different categories of people has a further effect that, in my view, is the most important of the three. It is also much less

recognized. Once widely shared status beliefs form about a social difference such as race, gender, or class-based life style, these beliefs constitute that difference as an *independent* dimension of inequality with its own sustaining social dynamic. That is, when a difference becomes a status difference, it becomes a separate factor that generates material inequalities between people above and beyond their personal control of resources.

Consider the following example. Say that men in a given society acquire an advantage in resources and power compared to women in that society. That fosters the development of status beliefs that men are "better." Once such gender status beliefs develop, however, they advantage men because they are *men* and not because they are richer or more powerful. A male leader, for instance, with the same position and access to the same resources as a woman leader, wields more influence than the woman because he is seen as a bit more capable in the job than she is (Eagly and Carli 2007). Gender status beliefs thus give men an advantage over women who are just as rich and located in positions that are just as powerful. As a consequence, status beliefs about differences such as gender, race, or class-based life style give those differences an autonomous dynamic that can continually reproduce inequalities in material outcomes on the basis of those differences. This autonomous dynamic operates primarily at the social relational level of self–other expectations, judgments, and behavior. Yet it is the key to how status-based social differences are written into material organizations of resources, especially in a society that values meritocracy and enacts legal constraints on explicitly discriminatory organizational rules.

Development of cultural status beliefs about group differences, then, partially disaggregates those differences from the direct control of resources and power and gives those differences, as status distinctions, independent causal force. This, in turn, creates a reciprocal causal interdependence between cultural status beliefs about social groups and material inequalities between these groups.

This interdependence has an element of dynamic tension. Control over resources by the status advantaged group is never complete. Changing material conditions push back against cultural status beliefs, potentially modifying and even eroding them. Yet once established, widely shared status beliefs have considerable resilience, so that they become a powerful, independent force for the perpetuation of patterns of inequality based on social difference.[3]

In the rest of my remarks, I describe more specifically exactly how cultural status beliefs, acting through micro-processes at the social relational level, independently create material inequalities on the basis of social difference. I will turn from why status matters to *how* it does. It will be helpful to begin by saying a little more about status beliefs themselves—why I focus on them and what the evidence suggests about their existence and nature.

STATUS BELIEFS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The Nature of Status Beliefs

Status is an inherently multi-level form of inequality in that it involves hierarchies of esteem and influence between individual actors as well as hierarchies of social esteem between groups in society. Decades of expectation states research, however, demonstrates that status processes among actors are largely driven by widely shared status beliefs about the worthiness and competence of people in the social groups to which the actors belong (Berger et al. 1977; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Webster and Foschi 1988). Cultural status beliefs about group differences are thus the key to status processes at both the individual and the group level.

Social psychological research on contemporary cultural stereotypes of social groups in U.S. society clearly documents the existence of widely shared status beliefs (Fiske 2011). This research shows that status beliefs form a central component of the widely known stereotypes of virtually all the social groups by which inequality in life outcomes is patterned in U.S. society. This includes gender, race, age, occupational, and educational groups and class categories like blue-collar versus middle-class or rich versus poor (Cuddy et al. 2007; Fiske et al. 2002). In these stereotypes, the perceived competence and agentic capacity attributed to people in one group compared to another is directly and powerfully correlated with their relative status. These stereotypes and the status beliefs they contain are consensual in society in that virtually everyone shares them as cultural knowledge about what "most people" think (Fiske et al. 2002). Finally, and importantly, the presumption that most people hold these beliefs gives them force in social relations (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Because individuals expect others to judge them according to these beliefs, they must take status beliefs into account in their own behavior, whether or not they personally endorse them.

How, then, do these widely shared status beliefs shape social relations in ways that are independently consequential for material inequality? There are three well-documented processes: status biases in judgments and behavior, associational preference biases, and reactions to status challenges.

Status Biases

For status beliefs to bias people's judgments and behavior, they need to become implicitly salient and this depends on social context, albeit in ways that can be systematically specified. Research shows that status beliefs about a social difference become salient in contexts in which people differ on the social distinction (e.g., a mixed-sex, mixed-race, or mixed-class setting) and in contexts in which the social difference is culturally understood to be relevant to the setting's goals, as in a gender-, race-, or class-typed setting (Berger and Webster 2006; Correll and Ridgeway 2003). When status beliefs are implicitly salient, they bias people's expectations for their own and the other's competence and suitability for authority in a situation. These

implicit biases are stronger the more relevant the social difference is perceived to be to the goals of the setting. For example, these biases are stronger in gender-, race-, and class-typed institutional settings such as elite universities for class and race and in engineering class-rooms for gender. Biased expectations for competence and authority, in turn, are impor-tant because they have self-fulfilling effects on people's behaviors and outcomes. By subtly shaping behavior, status beliefs create inequalities in assertive versus deferential behavior, actual task performance, attribu-tions of ability, influence, and situational rewards between otherwise equal men and women, whites and non-whites, and middle-class and working-class people (Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Driskell and Mullen 1990; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway and Fisk 2012; Webster and Driskell 1978).

These implicit status biases shape both the "supply side" and the "demand side" of peo-ple's everyday efforts to achieve the resources and positions of power by which we gauge material inequality. Status biases affect the confidence and energy with which people put themselves forward in a situation. They simultaneously affect others' willingness to pay attention to them and positively evaluate their efforts in that situation. The status advantaged speak up eagerly while the status disadvantaged hesitate; the same idea "sounds better" coming from the advantaged than from the disadvantaged; and the advantaged seem to themselves and others to be somehow the "type" for leadership. As a result, local hierarchies of influence and prominence that develop over multiple encounters and con-texts take on systematically similar forms.

These rarely noticed status biases repeat over and over again through the many goal-oriented encounters taking place in conse-quential organizational environments such as schools, workplaces, and health organiza-tions. The cumulative result is that individu-als from more privileged status groups—men, whites, the middle class—are systematically tracked into positions of greater resources and power, contributing as an independent force

to the patterning of material inequality based on gender, race, and class attributes. Through these same implicit, cumulative processes, men, whites, and the middle class are also apparently "revealed" to be simply "better" at valued social tasks than are women, people of color, and the working class, justifying and legitimating the resource and power inequali-ties between these groups. Although we par-ticipate every day in these social relational effects of status beliefs, we rarely see how they involve us in the production of who is better and more deserving of resources and advantages. It is because we do not see this production that status legitimizes inequality in an apparently meritocratic society.

Associational Preference Biases

A second means by which status beliefs about group differences create material inequalities is by introducing systematic biases in who people prefer for association and exchange. Individuals' first reactions to group differ-ences are to prefer people like themselves (see Dovidio and Gaertner 2010). But when the difference is a status difference, both high- and low-status group members recog-nize that the higher status group is more socially respected (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Because the status of those with whom an actor associates affects that actor's own status in a situation (i.e., sta-tus "spreads" through association), this cre-ates systematic incentives for actors to associate with higher status others (Berger, Anderson, and Zelditch 1972; Sauder et al. 2012; Thye 2000). Consequently, status beliefs intensify the in-group bias of high-status group members who see every reason to prefer people like themselves, not only for sociability but to recommend and hire for jobs. But these same status beliefs blunt the in-group bias of lower status group members who are torn between sticking with their own or favoring those from high-status groups.

The effects of status-based associational biases on actual patterns of association are complex because they depend on structural

constraints of the environment that shape who is available for association (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Smith 2001). At the very least, however, these biases undermine associational solidarity among individuals from lower status groups. Krysan and colleagues (2009), for instance, found that, even controlling for a neighborhood's socioeconomic level, whites preferred all-white over racially-mixed neighborhoods, but blacks preferred racially-mixed over all-black neighborhoods.

In organizational contexts, associational biases feed the process of "cloning" by actors from higher status groups. As Kanter (1977) pointed out long ago, the inherently uncertain conditions of exercising power encourage powerful organizational actors to favor socially similar others whom they feel they can rely on. To the extent that these powerful actors are members of high-status gender, race, and class groups, the people they network with and promote in an organization will disproportionately be from these same high-status groups. Organizational actors from low-status gender, race, and class groups, in contrast, will have divided interests between supporting those from their own groups and trying to network with higher status actors who can foster them in the organization (Cabrera and Thomas-Hunt 2007; Ibarra 1992; Sauder et al. 2012). Polls show, for instance, that women often prefer to work for male bosses (Gallup 2011). The systematic result, again, is to direct people from higher status groups smoothly toward positions of power and resources while creating network and, therefore, informational and opportunity barriers for those from lower status groups.

Reactions to Status Challenges

A third mechanism by which status beliefs create material inequalities derives from the implicit motive status beliefs create for people in high-status groups to defend their valued "sense of group position" (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999). When individuals from low-status groups engage in behavior perceived to challenge the status hierarchy, they frequently encounter a hostile backlash reaction from others, especially from high-status others (Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994). White women who engage in assertively dominant behavior are, compared to similar acting white men, disliked as "domineering," more likely to be sabotaged on a task, and judged as less hireable (Rudman et al. 2012). As Rudman and colleagues (2012) show, these backlash responses are not due to the perception that these woman are not appropriately warm, but to the fact that they are challenging the gender status hierarchy by acting "too dominant." Livingston and Pearce (2009) show that African American men who appear assertively dominant elicit similar backlash responses, presumably because their behavior challenges the racial status hierarchy.[4] Bobo (1999) argues that a great deal of racial prejudice in the contemporary United States can be understood as a defense of racial group status position. Behaviors perceived to challenge the class status hierarchy are likely to elicit similar backlash reactions. Whereas status bias and associational biases produce relatively unthinking biases in favor of the status privileged and against the less status privileged, defense of the status hierarchy results in more intentionally hostile actions to constrain lower status individuals who are perceived to "go too far."

Status Processes as Mechanisms of Inequality

Tilly (1998) argued that inequality between groups in society is maintained by a combination of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. As scholars have noted, however, this tells us more about the interests of dominant groups, the "why" question, than about the "how" question, that is, the specific mechanisms by which inequality is sustained (DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy 2007; Reskin 2003). Status bias, associational bias, and resistance to status challenges are culturally driven interpersonal processes that act as subtle but powerful mechanisms by which exploitation and opportunity hoarding are actually accomplished by privileged gender, race, and class

status groups. If we ignore them, our efforts to undermine durable patterns of gender, race, and class inequality are likely to be continually frustrated.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS STATUS PROCESSES

Thus far, I have discussed effects of status beliefs as if they were equivalent for gender, race, and class. In important ways, this is the case in that status biases, associational preference biases, and resistance to status challenges occur for all three social distinctions. But, this underlying similarity is not the full story due to structural and cultural differences in the nature of gender, race, and class as status distinctions in the U.S. context. This, in fact, is quite a complex subject that I am only going to hint at here.

I noted earlier that effects of status beliefs depend on the extent to which the social context of an interpersonal encounter makes status beliefs implicitly salient to participants and relevant to their concerns in the setting. The social contexts in which people of different sexes, races, and classes do or do not routinely encounter one another are thus important to the nature of the status effects that occur. Cross-category interactions—that is, mixed sex, race, or class interactions—trigger participants' status beliefs, so they are powerful sites for relational status effects. Due to structural factors such as demographic proportions, degree of intimate interdependence, and degree of institutional and residential segregation, the rate of routine cross-category interaction is quite high for gender, but rather less for race and class. This is especially the case for cross-category race and class interactions that take place outside of occupational role structured encounters (e.g., a convenience store clerk and a customer) (DiPrete et al. 2011; Ridgeway and Fisk 2012).

Gender, of course, is distinctive in that even household and family interactions are typically cross-category in terms of gender but not race or class. It is not surprising then, that status processes triggered in cross-category interactions are especially important for the daily production of gender inequality (Ridgeway 2011). Cross-category encounters still play an important role for race and class inequality, however, despite their lower overall rate. This is because consequential encounters in resource distributing institutions, such as employment, education, and health organizations, are typically cross-category for racial minorities and those from lower status class groups.

Status beliefs are also salient and shape events in status homogeneous encounters if they are perceived to be relevant to the goals of the setting (Berger and Webster 2006). This means that same gender, same race, or same class contexts can be significant sites for relational status processes if something makes status beliefs seem relevant to the participants. As I noted earlier, the culturally typed nature of the institutional context in which an encounter takes place—for example, a male-typed occupational setting, such as engineering, or a class- and race-typed neighborhood—can create this relevance.

The interests created by the status hierarchy itself can also create this contextual relevance by shaping actors' motives in a setting. This is particularly likely in meetings of high-status group members. The implicit project at the country club, the elite school, or the men's sports club can be to collectively construct and enact participants' difference and superiority in comparison to the excluded group (Khan 2011). The effect of status beliefs in this context is not to differentiate among the people in the setting, but to unite them in a collective project of distinction, a process that has been studied in detail in regard to class, at least, by Bourdieu ([1972] 1977, 1984) and other cultural sociologists (DiMaggio 1987; Lamont 1992).

In addition to the relative importance of cross-category versus within-category status effects, gender, race, and class also differ for cultural reasons in ways that have implications for how status processes based on them play out. In this regard, class is distinctive in

comparison to gender and race, at least in the U.S. context. Dominant U.S. beliefs treat sex category and race as relatively essentialized, stable aspects of people that are rooted in the body (Morning 2011; Prentice and Miller 2006). Class, in contrast, is believed by people in the United States to be achieved and, therefore, changeable (Kluegel and Smith 1986).[5] These different ideological representations have consequences: according to psychological research, people treat class as though it were less of an immutable essence of a person than are gender or race (Prentice and Miller 2007). This is despite what Bourdieu's ([1972] 1977, 1984) concept of *habitus* has taught us about how class is actually written into people's ways of being. It is also despite the fact that, as ethnomethodologists have demonstrated, in everyday social encounters, gender, race, and class are all interactional accomplishments (West and Fenstermaker 1995).

These differences in essentialization matter for status processes in social relations because status distinctions depend on the maintenance of a perceived boundary of difference between higher and lower status categories and a cultural means for placing people in these categories. Reflecting the construction of class as achieved rather than essential, the cues by which individuals class categorize one another in interactions—such as occupation, education, dress, accent, family background, and residence—form a less unified, more loosely bounded set of status attributes than do the more essentialized attributes by which people sex or race categorize. As a result, class status effects in interactions are likely to be more variable across situations, as the class cues involved differ, than are gender and race status effects (DiMaggio 2012; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013; Sayer 2005).

In addition, whereas the common structure of status beliefs is to assert a difference between contrasting groups that is construed to show one group as more worthy and competent than another, the exact nature of the difference that reveals the superiority in worth and competence can take different forms. In the United States, the construction of class as

achieved rather than an immutable essence affects this as well. It causes class status differentiation to depend especially strongly on the maintenance of distinctive cultural practices, accomplishments, and possessions to mark and manifest the status boundary. These class "life style" groups are the status groups to which Weber ([1918] 1968) referred.

In particular, the class-based status hierarchy turns more intensely on higher class people's possession of *exclusive* "cultural capital" than do the race and gender status hierarchies (Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1953). For higher class people's elite capital to remain exclusive, it must continually adapt and change. For instance, "inside knowledge" about what it takes to impress admissions committees of elite colleges evolves to maintain the competitive edge of class privileged groups (Ridgeway and Fisk 2012; Stuber 2006). The distinctive reliance on exclusive knowledge characterizes the processes through which status matters for inequality based on class more than that based on race or gender.

Now that I have made a general case for how status processes acting at the social relational level independently create material inequalities based on social differences, I will briefly describe some empirical examples from recent research that show how status processes are consequential for gender, race, and class inequality. The gender and class examples highlight effects of status biases and associational biases, and the race example illustrates the consequential effects of reactions to status challenges. I chose these examples to illustrate different ways that status can matter, ways that can also apply to other status-valued social differences.

GENDERING ORGANIZATIONS

For gender, I draw on my own work to illustrate how status processes can help answer a fundamental question about how gender inequality persists in the modern context where institutional, legal, and economic processes work against it (Jackson 1998; Ridgeway 2011). A wide range of research

demonstrates that assumptions about the gendered characteristics of ideal workers for jobs and about the lesser value of women's work are stamped into the very structures, practices, and procedures of employment organizations (Acker 1990; Charles and Grusky 2004; England 2010; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999). Examples are the sex-typing and sex-segregation of jobs, different authority structures associated with male and female jobs, and the gendered assumptions built into conventional structures of work time and promotion rituals. These gendered workplace structures, in turn, drive gender inequality in wages, authority, and even the household division of labor (England, Reid, and Kilbourne 1996; Petersen and Morgan 1995; Smith 2002; Williams 2010).

But how are gendered assumptions written into workplace structures and procedures in the first place? The root mechanism, I argue, is the operation of gender status processes, particularly status biases and associational biases, working "in the room" at the social relational level as the new job definition, evaluation system, authority structure, or way of working is created (Ridgeway 2011). Nelson and Bridges (1999), for instance, show that several widely used organizational pay-setting systems were developed in interpersonal decision-making contexts in which dominant actors, who were largely white males, denied women and other lower status actors a significant voice in the proceedings. The resulting pay practices they developed were infused with gender status biases and systematically disadvantaged the pay for female-dominated jobs. In regard to one such case, Nelson and Bridges (1999:199–200) write, "In systems such as this, . . . where the principles and practices of salary setting can be traced to the interests and activities of key actors . . . the data suggest that the disadvantaged position of female workers in the bureaucratic politics of this system has both contributed to and tended to preserve inequality in pay between predominantly male and female jobs." Once created, implicitly gendered organizational structures and procedures spread through institutional processes

and persist through bureaucratic inertia (Baron et al. 2007; Phillips 2005).

The cutting edge of gender inequality, however, lies at sites of innovation where new types of work or new forms of living are created. Such sites tend to be small, interpersonal settings that are outside established organizations—think of computer companies that started in garages or software companies that emerged from students talking in their college dorms. Both the uncertainty of their tasks and the interpersonal nature of the setting increases the likelihood that participants will implicitly draw on the too convenient cultural frame of gender to help organize their new ways of working. Perhaps background gender beliefs implicitly shape what they decide is the "cool" versus routine part of their work, or their assumptions about how they should work together, who is good at what, or what kind of people should be brought into the project in what roles. As they unknowingly make use of gender beliefs to help order their work, participants reinscribe cultural assumptions about gender status and gender difference into the new activities, procedures, and forms of organizations they create. The effect is to reinvent gender inequality for a new era. In this way, I argue, gender status processes, acting through cultural beliefs that shape interpersonal events, act as a general mechanism by which gender inequality is rewritten into new organizational forms and practices as they emerge, allowing this inequality to persist in modified form despite social and economic transformations in society. This status-driven persistence dynamic does not mean gender inequality cannot be overcome, but it does suggest a constant struggle with uneven results (Ridgeway 2011).

CLASS STATUS AND "GATEWAY" INTERACTIONS

My example of how class-based status processes shape material outcomes focuses on what I call "gateway" interactions (Ridgeway and Fisk 2012). These are interpersonal encounters that take place in organizations—such as educational, workplace, or health

institutions—that mediate people's access to the valued life outcomes by which we judge inequality, like good jobs, income, positions of power, and health. Encounters with school officials, job interviews, and doctor visits are examples. Class-based status beliefs are especially likely to become salient in gateway encounters when participants differ in class background, and the status biases about competence that they introduce have consequential material effects. Lutfey and Freese (2005), for instance, describe how a middle-class physician, expecting less competence from a working-class diabetes patient, prescribed a simpler treatment regime than was suggested for a middle-class patient. The simpler regime, however, is slightly less effective in controlling the disease.

In institutions in which gateway encounters occur, the dominant actors—doctors, educators, managers, professionals—are overwhelmingly middle class. As a result, these institutions' workplace cultures and practices are infused with the implicit but distinctive assumptions, values, and taken-for-granted knowledge of the middle class. This, itself, is an example of how class status, as status, not merely control of resources and power, becomes embedded in organizational structures of resources and power. But in gateway encounters, the implicitly classed nature of the social rules that govern the encounter have a further effect. They create a context in which the implicit interactional rules are better understood and more familiar to middle-class petitioners (e.g., job applicants, patients, and students) than to working-class ones (Bourdieu 1984; Stephens et al. 2012). This knowledge difference reinforces the presumed competence differences evoked by class status bias (Ridgeway and Fisk 2012).

Lareau (2002) gives us an example in the visits to pediatricians that she observed with middle-class and working-class parents and children. With the confidence of a class status equal, the middle-class mother prepped her son to not only answer the doctor's questions but to ask questions in return. The boy did this and soon established a friendly banter that allowed the doctor to learn more about the child's eating habits and whether he was taking his medication. With richer information, the doctor was able to offer more effective treatment.

The working-class mother, in contrast, seemed intimidated and hesitant in the face of the doctor's status superiority. Both she and her son gave minimal answers to the doctor's questions and did not volunteer information. The outcome of this constrained and uneasy interaction was that the doctor knew less about the child and gave the mother limited feedback about the boy's health. For working-class people, consequential gateway encounters are cross-class, status-biased contexts that often invisibly frustrate their efforts to achieve the valued life outcomes these significant encounters mediate.

CHALLENGES TO THE RACIAL STATUS HIERARCHY

For an example of how racial status processes matter for power and resource inequality, we need look no further than contemporary political developments that coincided with events one could perceive as challenges to the established racial status order of the United States. Substantial recent immigration and projections in the popular press that whites will soon lose their position as the demographic majority coincided with the election of an African American president. Research on reactions to status challenges suggests that at least some whites are likely to react to these events with status-motivated political efforts to reassert their own, more privileged, racial status position.

Two recent Internet experiments by Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts (2013) clearly demonstrate this status challenge reaction. In the first study, the researchers showed participants in one condition graphs depicting a declining white income advantage over nonwhites. After exposure to this racial hierarchy threat, whites, but not non-whites, reported significantly greater support for the Tea Party and higher levels of symbolic racism. This is

in comparison with whites and non-whites in a control condition who saw graphs that depicted the persistence of white income advantage.

In the second study, the researchers told all participants that whites are a rapidly declining proportion of the population and would soon be a minority. After this racial hierarchy threat, participants were again asked their views about the Tea Party, but the movement was described for half the participants as backing, among other policies, actions directed at the racial order, such as immigration controls, welfare cuts, and so on. For the other participants, the Tea Party was described simply in libertarian, free market terms. Reacting to the racial status threat, whites identified significantly more with the Tea Party when it included racial order policies than in the purely libertarian condition. The views of non-whites were unaffected. These results suggest that whites' perceptions of challenges to their racial status position do in fact evoke resistance reactions that increase their support for political organizations they perceive as upholding the traditional racial hierarchy. This, in turn, has potential consequences for the evolving power relations between racial groups in the contemporary United States.

CONCLUSIONS

To understand the mechanisms by which social inequality is actually made in society, I argue that we need to more thoroughly incorporate the effects of status—inequality based on differences in esteem and respect—alongside those based on resources and power. This is particularly the case if we wish to understand the mechanisms behind obdurate, durable patterns of inequality in society, such as those based on social differences like gender, race, and class-based life style. Failing to understand the independent force of status processes has limited our ability to explain the persistence of such patterns of inequality in the face of remarkable socioeconomic change, or to explain, for instance, phenomena like the "stall" in the gender revolution

(Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004; England 2010).

As a basis for social inequality, status is a bit different from resources and power. It is based on cultural beliefs rather than directly on material arrangements, and it works its effects primarily at the actor level of everyday social relations rather than at a larger structural level. These ways in which status is distinctive as an inequality process present challenges to integrating it into our standard accounts of social stratification. But the difficulties we encounter in incorporating status also illuminate all we have been missing in our efforts to understand the foundations of social inequality. We need to appreciate that status, like resources and power, is a basic source of human motivation that powerfully shapes the struggle for precedence out of which inequality emerges. Equally, we need to appreciate that inequality processes at the micro level work together with those at the macro level to create the mutually sustaining patterns of inequality among social groups in society that make such patterns so difficult to change.

I have argued that cultural status beliefs about groups or "types" of people shape individuals' social relations through three processes that are consequential for inequality among individuals and groups in society. Status biases shape implicit assumptions about who is "better," more competent, and more deserving of jobs, promotions, money, and power. Associational preference biases shape who people form ties with and favor for exchange of information, opportunities, and affection. And, resistance reactions to status challenges act to constrain lower status people who go too far. These micro-level status processes have important, underlying commonalities across otherwise different social distinctions such as gender, race, and class, despite there also being real differences among them. Acting through social encounters that repeat over and over again in the organizations that distribute resources and power, the effects of these processes accumulate. They subtly, but persistently and systematically, direct individuals from higher status

groups toward privileged life outcomes while holding lower status others back.

In the end, it is status that drives *group* differences as organizing axes of inequality, in contrast to mere *individual* differences in resources and power. And it is widely shared cultural status beliefs at the macro level that shape the everyday social relations at the micro level that infuse group differences into positions of power and resources in society's consequential institutions and organizations. It is also such micro-macro status processes that implicitly subvert the resistance of the disadvantaged and legitimate the structure of inequality. It is time we took status more seriously.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I speak of categories or "types" of people here because of my intention to discuss the role of status in gender, race, and class inequality. However, status rankings pertain to social "actors" more broadly, and thus can involve rankings among corporate actors, such as organizations or the producers of high- or low-status products, as well as individuals and "types" of individuals (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Even for corporate actors, status relations are inter-actor social relations (e.g., Apple versus Dell in computers). Status relations among organizations are also consequential for the structure of material inequality in society, but because I am focusing on gender, race, and class inequality, I will not deal with this here.

2. In discussing class-related status beliefs, I will focus primarily on the middle- versus working-class contrast. The largest part of the U.S. population is concentrated in these two class groups, so most interpersonal encounters that evoke class status beliefs involve people from these groups, and status beliefs about them are culturally prominent (see Ridgeway and Fisk 2012). It is worth remembering, however, that being upper class, rather than just middle class, evokes a further advantage in status and competence, just as being lower class rather than working class brings a further status and competence disadvantage (Fiske 2011).

3. Key to the dynamic tension between cultural status beliefs about differing groups and the power and resource differences between those groups is the tendency for widely shared cultural beliefs to change more slowly than the material circumstances they reflect (Brinkman and Brinkman 1997; Ogburn 1957; Ridgeway 2011). Due to this cultural lag effect, people confront changing material conditions with cultural status beliefs that are more traditional than the circumstances. Acting on the more traditional beliefs reframes the new conditions in less innovative terms, blunting the change effect. Over time, however, continuing pressure from changing material circumstances does change status beliefs. For a discussion of evidence for this argument in regard to changing gender status beliefs, see Ridgeway (2011, chapter 6).

4. An attentive reader will notice an intersectional gap in these studies of status challenge effects for white women and for African American men. Research shows that cultural beliefs about gender and black-white race create more complex, intersectional status challenge effects for African American women, but these women, too, face status motivated barriers to their efforts to achieve leadership positions (Livingston, Shelby, and Washington 2012; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013).

5. I am not arguing here that gender and race actually *are* more essential social differences than class, but rather that they are represented as being so in widely held cultural beliefs in the United States. Beliefs about the relatively essential nature of race and the relatively unessential nature of class may be distinct to the U.S. context.

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