

CHAPTER 16

Inequality, Status, and the Construction of Status Beliefs

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As Weber (1922/1968) observed, status is a fundamental dimension of social inequality in complex societies, along with wealth and power. Status inequality is based on evaluative rankings in terms of social honor, esteem, and prestige. Compared to wealth and power, the organization and consequences of inequality based on status is relatively undertheorized in contemporary American sociology, at least as a large-scale social process. Part of the difficulty in developing comprehensive analyses of status inequality derives from the multilevel nature of status processes. Status involves evaluative relations between social groups, such as occupations, ethnic groups, or genders. It also involves hierarchies of esteem and influence among actors.

In his analysis, Weber focused on the status honor attached to groups of people who recognize each other as equals and share a “style of life.” The status honor of groups, he argued, is a dimension of social cleavage and inequality that, while correlated with wealth and power, cannot be simply reduced to them. Weber’s insight about the importance of group status survives in contemporary studies of social stratification in a relatively truncated and undertheorized form. It is typically reduced to measures of occupational prestige and educational attainment.

A different tradition of American sociology, on the other hand, has devoted decades to studying status processes. Furthermore, it has developed systematic theories and evidence in regard to them (Balkwell, 1991; Berger & Zelditch, 1998; Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Fisek, Berger, & Norman, 1991; Goffman, 1956, 1970; Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye, & Markovsky, 1998; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995; Skvoretz & Fararo, 1996; Troyer & Younts, 1997; Webster & Foschi, 1988). This tradition, however, approaches status as a hierarchy of influence, deference, and esteem that emerges from interaction among actors.

To better understand the role of status in social inequality, we need to understand the relationship between status between groups and status hierarchies among actors. There are two reasons why it would be valuable to achieve such a more comprehensive account of status

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inequality. First, even casual observation of human affairs suggests that the social esteem in which people are held is a powerful motivating factor in their behavior and consequently in the organization of social life. Teenagers risk physical harm for "respect" in the streets. Athletes turn down lucrative financial offers because they feel the offer does not show them the respect they deserve. Executives jockey for influence on the board. Academics struggle for esteemed reputations.

In addition, status processes are a process through which one type of social "closure" and exclusion occurs (Giddens, 1973). This, of course, was Weber's point. Stratification theorists emphasize the importance of social, cultural, and institutional exclusionary mechanisms that effectively channel people toward positions of power and wealth that are consistent with their social background and away from those that are inconsistent with that background. Interactional status processes have been shown to bias the perceived competence, performance, and influence of people in manner consistent with their social background. This, in turn, affects those people's opportunity to achieve positions of power, wealth, and social honor (Lovaglia et al., 1998; Ridgeway, 1997; Webster & Foschi, 1988). This can be viewed as a closure and exclusion process that contributes to inequality on the basis of status valued social distinctions such as occupation, race, gender, and education.

The task of building a systematic account of status inequality that links status between groups with status hierarchies among actors is complex. The systematic theory and knowledge that has accumulated in regard to status hierarchies among actors, however, provides a useful theoretical platform from which to approach the problem. This body of knowledge directs our attention to the linking concept of status beliefs. Status beliefs are widely shared cultural beliefs that people in one social group (professionals, men, whites) are more esteemed and competent than people in another social group (service workers, women, people of color) (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Status beliefs can be held as people's perceptions of what "most others" believe or as what people themselves believe. As their definition suggests, status beliefs are cultural representations of the evaluative relationship between social groups or categories of people in a society.

Status beliefs construct and justify inequality between social groups by asserting differences between them in social worth and competence. By so doing, status beliefs affirm the significance of the group distinction for social relations in a society. As a variety of researchers have observed, in virtually all societies the social distinctions among people that are most important for organizing social relations (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, education, and occupation) are also status-valued distinctions (Sidanius & Pratto, 1988; Jackman, 1994). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, research on status hierarchies among individuals has repeatedly demonstrated that these hierarchies are largely organized by the way people's distinguishing attributes evoke status beliefs about the social groups to which they belong (see Webster & Foschi, 1988, for a review). Status beliefs tell people "who" they are dealing with.

Although status beliefs are a key linking mechanism between group-level status distinctions in a society and status hierarchies among individuals, we have surprisingly little knowledge about the social processes by which status beliefs emerge, are maintained, or change. A systematic account of multilevel status processes will remain out of reach until we gain a greater understanding of the social determinants of status beliefs.

Status construction theory is a recent effort to describe one (although not the only) set of processes through which status beliefs arise or change in a population (Ridgeway, 1991, 1997, 2000; Ridgeway & Balkwell, 1997; Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers, & Robinson, 1998; Webster & Hysom, 1998). Status construction theory is built on the theoretical platform of expectation states theory. Expectation states theory, in turn, is the dominant and empirically best-

documented account of the organization of status hierarchies among actors (see Wagner & Berger, 1993, for a review). Thus, status construction theory builds on what is known about microlevel status processes and attempts to formulate initial links between these processes and group-level status dynamics. This chapter reviews status construction theory and research that addresses it. In order to do so, it begins with a brief review of the evidence in regard to microlevel status processes and expectation states theory's account of these processes.

INTERACTIONAL STATUS HIERARCHIES

When people interact in regard to a shared, collective goal or task, inequalities quickly emerge among them in how much they participate, the attention and evaluation they receive from others, and the influence they achieve over group decisions (Bales, 1970; Fisek et al., 1991; Fisek & Ofshe, 1970; Strodbeck, James, & Hawkins, 1957). Expectation states theory calls this interactional status hierarchy a power and prestige order and explains it in terms of the implicit performance expectations group members form for themselves compared to each other member of the group (Berger et al., 1974, 1977; Wagner & Berger, 1993). Performance expectations, which are often unconscious, are members' guesses about the likely usefulness of their own contributions to the group task or goal compared the contributions of another. The lower an actor's expectations for her own contributions compared to another's, the more likely she is to hesitate in presenting her own ideas, to ask the other for suggestions, to react positively to ideas the other presents, and to accept influence from the other. In this self-fulfilling manner, each member's expectation disadvantage (or advantage) compared to others shapes her participation, evaluation, attention, and influence, creating a behavioral power and prestige order. A large body of evidence supports this account of status in goal-oriented encounters (see Wagner & Berger, 1993; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995, for reviews). Note that this account reveals interactional status hierarchies to be a ranking of members in terms of expected competence in the situation and in status-marking behaviors such as assertion, deference, and influence.

Since members' expectations for one another's competence in the situation drives the behavioral power and prestige order, expectation states theory devotes its attention to predicting how social factors shape the formation of these expectations. Research has shown that differences in the social rewards or resources, such as pay, that actors possess tend to create corresponding expectations about competence and therefore influence and deference in the situation (Cook, 1975; Harrod, 1980; Stewart & Moore, 1992). Actors' assertive or hesitant behaviors in themselves also tend to create self-fulfilling expectations for differences in competence (Berger et al., 1974; Fisek et al., 1991). However, among the most pervasive and powerful factors that shape competence expectations and power and prestige in a setting are social distinctions such as gender, race, education, or occupation that carry status value in society.

Extensive research has shown that when a status-valued social distinction becomes salient in a situation, either because actors differ on the distinction (e.g., gender in a mixed sex context) or it is relevant to the situation (gender in a gender-linked situation), status beliefs about the distinction are evoked and shape the expectations actors form for one another's competence in the local situation. Through this implicit, usually unconscious process, people who belong to more honored social groups (men, whites, professionals) expect themselves and are expected by others to be more competent than people in the situation from less-honored social groups (women, nonwhites, service workers). As a consequence, those from more

honored groups are emboldened to act more assertively, are given more opportunities to perform, are perceived as performing better, are attributed more underlying ability, and may actually perform better, given their greater opportunities, compared to those from less-honored social groups (see Webster & Foschi, 1988; Foschi, 1998, for reviews; see Lovaglia et al., 1998; Troyer & Younts, 1997, for recent developments).

Interactional processes in schools, job interviews, and workplaces mediate many of the processes by which people are directed toward or away from positions of power, material rewards, and social honor. Consequently, the implicit status processes that organize these interactions act as social closure processes that subtly but persistently channel people from higher-status groups toward more valued social outcomes than those that people from lower status groups are channeled toward.

The decades of systematic theorizing and research about status processes at the micro-level have demonstrated that cultural status beliefs about the evaluative standing of social groups are persistently at play in goal-oriented interactional contexts. Status construction theory takes this basic finding as its initial point of departure. The theory reasons that, if status beliefs are continually at play in interaction, then encounters among people, especially across social difference boundaries, are likely to be a potent forum for the creation, spread, maintenance, and change of status beliefs about those social differences (Ridgeway, 1991, 2000; Ridgeway & Balkwell, 1997; Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000; Ridgeway et al., 1998).

STATUS CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Status construction theory argues that when people on opposite sides of a social difference boundary regularly interact in regard to shared goals, the terms on which they interact, which will be shaped by structural conditions such as resources differences, affect the hierarchies of influence and esteem that emerge in the encounters. The repeated association between people's social difference categories and their influence and esteem in encounters induces participants to form shared status beliefs about the social difference. People carry these status beliefs to subsequent encounters with individuals from the other category and by acting on the beliefs induce some of those others to take on the status beliefs as well. This creates a diffusion process that under some structural conditions will create roughly consensual (i.e., widely shared) status beliefs. In effect, status construction theory argues that interactional contexts "bootstrap" the formation of consensual status beliefs about social groups or categories by creating powerful local realities for people that embody for them and appear to presume a given status belief before the belief is widely accepted in actuality.

As this brief summary implies, status construction theory applies to the development, maintenance, and change of status beliefs about socially distinguished groups or categories of people who are cooperatively interdependent in that they must regularly interact to achieve mutual goals. The theory does not argue that the processes it describes are the only means by which status beliefs develop in such populations. However, if the processes described by status construction theory can be shown to be sufficient to produce status beliefs and if they are plausibly present in society in regard to a socially salient distinction such as gender or race, then they are likely to be important for maintaining or changing status beliefs about that distinction. These processes can contribute or undermine current status beliefs about a social distinction whether or not they played a role in the actual historical origin of those beliefs.

The social distinction that provides the group boundary around which status beliefs form can be marked by anything from lifestyle to behavioral or physical attributes. The theory

assumes that the distinction is relatively salient in that it is easily recognized among the population. Since the more salient a social attribute is, the more susceptible it is to acquire status value, the theory assumes that the distinction in question is not systematically correlated with distinguishing attributes (other than resources) that are more salient than it is. Of course, the social demarcation of a difference and the development of status beliefs about it are likely to shape one another in a reciprocal process. Simply to provide a logical starting point, the theory assumes that a social distinction exists that is easily recognized in the population but has not yet acquired a status evaluation that is widely shared in the population. In that sense, it is a nominal (i.e., unordered) distinction among people in the society.

There is substantial evidence that the simple creation of a difference boundary of any sort between people is enough to create evaluative favoritism in them for their own group or category (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1993; Turner, 1987). It is important to keep in mind, however, that there is a difference between this simple in-group favoritism and the formation of status beliefs. With the development of status beliefs, groups on both sides of a difference boundary agree, or at least concede, that one group is socially recognized as more esteemed and more competent than the other group. Thus it is the beliefs of those who are disadvantaged by status beliefs that distinguish such beliefs from the in-group bias created by difference alone. For status beliefs to emerge, such people must overcome their tendency to prefer their own group and come to believe that, as a matter of social reality, the other group is more socially respected and competent than their own.

As this discussion implies, status beliefs are beliefs about what “most people” think. The presumption that “most people” would accept a given status belief gives that belief a social validity that allows it to constrain people’s behavior (Ridgeway, 2000). It makes the belief seem to be a “social fact” that the person must deal with whether she likes it or not. Status construction theory argues that interactional contexts create powerful local realities for their participants that give them the sense that most people would accept a given status belief. In this way, interactional contexts persuade people to take on status beliefs even when those beliefs disadvantage their own group.

To explain how interactional processes create widely shared status beliefs in a population, status construction theory offers arguments that proceed on two levels. At the macrolevel, that theory considers how structural conditions affect the rate of encounters across the group boundary (say, between As and Bs) and the terms on which these encounters occur. Principal among the structural conditions that shape the terms of encounters are inequalities between the groups in the distribution of material resources or other factors, such as the control of technology, that would systematically bias the development of influence hierarchies in intergroup (i.e., A/B) encounters. At the microlevel, the theory offers an account of the processes by which intergroup encounters induce their participants to form and spread status beliefs about the group distinction. The two levels of arguments come together in the consideration of whether status beliefs acquired in local encounters have the potential to spread widely in society or whether they are likely to dissipate in a meaningless sea of conflicting beliefs about the group distinction. I will first describe the theory’s microlevel arguments about interaction and the formation of status beliefs, along with empirical tests of these arguments. These microlevel arguments build on the platform of accumulated theory and evidence about interactional status processes. Then I will return to the theory’s macrolevel arguments about the structural conditions in which these belief formation processes are embedded and describe how these conditions shape the likelihood that widely shared status beliefs will emerge. The macrolevel arguments draw on an insight from Weber’s observations about status distinctions between groups.

Interaction and the Formation of Status Beliefs

The core of status construction theory is a deceptively simple set of assumptions about how interactional contexts induce people to form and spread status beliefs. Expectation states research has demonstrated that interactional status hierarchies in goal-oriented contexts can be understood as observable orders of power and prestige, or status-marking behaviors (e.g., influence, opportunities to participate, evaluation, and participation) that are driven by actors' underlying assumptions about each other's relative competence in the situation. Status construction theory argues that these implicit assumptions about particular actors' competence and esteem in the situation can provide the seeds out of which those actors form beliefs about whole categories of actors.

When actors come together in a goal-oriented encounter, an influence hierarchy quickly develops. When the actors also differ on a salient group distinction, the formation of an influence hierarchy between them creates a local reality in which a person from one group (say, an A) is active, influential, and apparently more competent. The person from the other group (a B) finds herself cast in the role of reacting to the first person. Because such hierarchies develop implicitly, through multiple small behaviors and reactions, actors rarely closely scrutinize what is happening. Instead, they simply find it revealed to them, through the unfolding of events, that the A is more competent and assertive and the B is more reactive and apparently less competent. Since both the A and the B participate in these unfolding events, the social validity of what they apparently reveal becomes difficult for them to deny. Since the actual origin of the influence hierarchy is obscure for them but their group difference is salient, both the A and the B may associate their standing in the hierarchy with their group difference. They may form a fledgling status belief that As are more competent and status worthy than Bs.

The A may hold this self-flattering belief as a matter of personal conviction as well as a reality most others would accept. The B may simply concede that "most others" would assume that As are more competent than Bs. Either way, however, the belief constructs an apparent reality that both will have to take into account in their future A/B encounters. If subsequent encounters repeat the association between As and Bs and the enactment of influence and esteem, then the fledgling status belief will be strengthened. Encounters that contradict that association will undermine the belief.

All other things being equal, however, future encounters are more likely to confirm a believing A or B's initial status belief than to contradict it. Expectation states research has shown that when actors modify their expectations for a category of social actors in one goal-oriented encounter, they transfer those modified expectations to future encounters with such actors and treat those actors according to the modified expectations (Markovsky, Smith & Berger, 1984; Pugh & Wahrman, 1983). As other research shows, the result is often a self-fulfilling prophecy (Fiske et al., 1991; Moore, 1985; Skvoretz & Fararo, 1996). Other things equal, when an actor treats another assertively, assuming the other to be less competent and status worthy, or deferentially, because "most people" would presume the other to be more competent, a corresponding influence hierarchy emerges between them that confirms the first actor's assumptions. Thus status beliefs fostered in an initial encounter may be strengthened in future encounters through their self-fulfilling effects on those encounters.

When a believing A or B treats a nonbeliever according to the belief in an A/B encounter and creates a corresponding influence hierarchy between them, a second effect occurs as well. The believer creates an experience for the nonbeliever that may cause the nonbeliever to take on the believer's status belief as well. This effect is also important for status construction theory. Due to her status belief, say, an A presumes that the B in this situation will have less to

offer than she herself does. So A speaks up confidently, offering suggestions for accomplishing their shared goal. B sees a display of confidence and assertiveness that is usually associated with status and competence. When B offers her own suggestions, A disagrees with them, implicitly assuming that they are less likely to be helpful. In the face of A's confident disagreement, B hesitates and A's ideas come to dominate their collective decisions. Through the belief formation processes described earlier, there is a chance that this experience will cause B to form a status belief favoring As as well. As a result, status construction theory argues that status beliefs not only can be created but also spread through intergroup encounters, creating a diffusion process that makes widely shared status beliefs possible.

These arguments are summarized in the theory's belief formation assumptions (Ridgeway, 2000). A few definitions will make these assumptions clearer. Status beliefs are corresponding when the nominal state (i.e., group or category) that is associated with more valued status markers and greater expected competence in the situation also is associated in the status belief with more positive social evaluation and greater competence compared to the other nominal state. Following Weber (1922/1968) and Zelditch and colleagues (Zelditch & Walker, 1984; Zelditch & Floyd, 1998), such a correspondence is socially valid for an actor when the actor expects others to accept the correspondence in the situation. When such a correspondence appears consensual in a situation in that it is not openly challenged, it appears to be mutually accepted and therefore socially valid (see Ridgeway, 2000, for a discussion). Status markers include the assertion, influence, and deference behaviors by which the behavioral power and prestige order is enacted.

1. Given a situation in which there is a socially valid correspondence between individuals' differing states of a nominal (i.e., unordered) distinction and their differentiated status markers and expected competence, then there is a likelihood that actors in the situation will form corresponding status beliefs about the nominal distinction.
2. Actors transfer expectations about categories of actors formed in one setting to future encounters with actors that also differ in those categories.
3. Subsequent encounters with others who differ on the nominal distinction that confirm an actor's newly formed status belief strengthen that belief while inconsistent, disconfirming experiences undermine it.

These microlevel assumptions about the creation and spread of status beliefs in intergroup encounters are at the core of status construction theory's larger argument about the emergence and maintenance of widely shared status beliefs. As a result, the theory turns on their empirical plausibility. What is the evidence that interaction can create and spread status beliefs?

EVIDENCE THAT INTERACTION CAN CREATE AND SPREAD STATUS BELIEFS. As I mentioned, there is existing empirical support for the second assumption. Experiments show that when interactional experiences modify actors' expectations for categories of people such as men and women, actors transfer their modified expectations to future encounters with people of those categories (Markovsky et al., 1984; Pugh & Wahrman, 1983). However, the impact of their modified expectations weakens with each transfer unless it is strengthened by subsequent confirming experiences (Markovsky et al., 1984). The latter point offers partial support for the third assumption.

What is the evidence for the crucial first assumption about belief formation? Two recent experiments support its plausibility. In the first experiment, Ridgeway and Erickson (2000, study 1) created a nominal distinction between subjects and their partners by giving them a test

purportedly of “personal response style” that classified people into two types: S2s and Q2s. Then subjects and partners worked as two-person teams on a group decision-making task. The partner was actually a confederate who interacted with the subject in either an assertive, confident manner or a hesitant, deferential manner. As expectation theory predicts, this produced clear influence hierarchies between the confederate and subject that favored the subject when the confederate was deferential and favored the confederate when the confederate was assertive. Subjects then worked on another round of the decision task with a new partner, also a confederate, who also was nominally different from the subject and who again acted assertively or deferentially, creating a second influence hierarchy similar to the first. Thus the subjects experienced two goal-oriented encounters where those from the other nominal group consistently differed from the subjects in influence.

After these two encounters, subjects were asked how “most people” rate the typical S2 and the typical Q2. Subjects who were influential over their nominally different partners thought that their own group is seen as more respected, higher status, more powerful, more competent, but not as socially considerate as the other group. Even more important for the theory, subjects who were less influential than their partners thought that most people consider their own group to be less respected, competent, powerful, and lower status but more socially considerate than their partner’s group. Thus subjects formed clear status beliefs about the nominal distinction from their interactional experiences. They formed these beliefs even when the beliefs disadvantaged their own group.

Note the interesting compensatory relationship in these results between the secondary “social considerateness” factor compared to the dominant status and competence factors. Studies of a variety of existing status beliefs about occupations, gender, and general social status show a similar structure (Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996). That this structure also was represented in the beliefs that subjects formed in this experiment further supports our conclusion that genuine status beliefs developed.

This experiment supports two aspects of status construction theory’s argument about the creation and spread of status beliefs, both of which are captured in the first belief formation assumption. First, it demonstrates that a socially valid (i.e., uncontested) correspondence between influence and esteem in goal-oriented encounters and a previously unordered group difference, at least if repeated, does induce those in the encounter to form status beliefs about the difference. Second, it supports the idea that those who held status beliefs can spread them to others by treating those others in accord with the beliefs so that a corresponding influence hierarchy develops between them. In effect, the confederates in this experiment, by acting assertively or deferentially, treated the subjects as if they held status beliefs about the group difference. By creating influence hierarchies between the confederates and subjects, this treatment effectively “taught” the status belief to the subjects. Thus this experiment also demonstrates that status beliefs can be spread through interaction by treating others in accord with them.

How powerful is the process by which interaction spreads status beliefs to others? In Ridgeway and Erickson’s (2000, study 1) experiment, encounters were dyadic. What if others were involved as well? Would they acquire the status belief from seeing someone different from them repeatedly either assert influence over or defer to someone like themselves? The logic of the first assumption seems to suggest that they should. After all, these bystander participants also experience the enactment of a socially valid correspondence between actors’ nominal categories and their influence and esteem in the situation. A second experiment examined this question.

Ridgeway and Erickson (2000, study 2) told subjects that they would be part of three-

person decision-making teams. Based on the purported test of response style described earlier, subjects found they were similar to one teammate but different from the other. The teammates were actually taped confederate–subject interactions from the first experiment. The live subject was always the opposite response style from the taped confederate. In half the conditions, subjects heard the confederate defer to the influence of someone like them. In the other half of the conditions, subjects heard the confederate assert influence over a teammate like them. Subjects listened to their teammates' discussion before all three made a combined team choice on each task trial. In round two of the experiment, subjects worked on a second team under identical circumstances as in the first round. Thus round two repeated round one with different taped teammates.

The results showed that subjects did indeed take on status beliefs from repeatedly witnessing a different other accept influence from or assert influence over someone like them. Again, subjects who heard people like them deferred to by different others thought that their own group is seen as higher status, more competent, but less considerate than the other group. Those who observed people from another group repeatedly assert influence over those like them conceded that most would view their own group as lower status and less competent, although more considerate, than the other group. Once again, subjects formed clear status beliefs about the group distinction even when those beliefs disadvantaged their own group.

Taken together, these experiments offer clear support for status construction theory's claim that interactional experiences can cause people to form status beliefs about social distinctions. Furthermore, those who acquire status beliefs about a social distinction can "teach" those beliefs to others by acting on the beliefs in subsequent encounters with others who differ on the distinction. Yes, the status beliefs participants formed in these studies are relatively artificial in that they pertain to a made up social distinction. Yet, if people are willing to form strongly differentiated beliefs about minor differences from relatively unimportant interactions in an experiment, are they likely to form any weaker beliefs about real social distinctions from their much more powerful and involving experiences in real interaction? That seems unlikely.

A question remains, however, about the significance of such local-level individual beliefs for the development of consensual status beliefs that are part of the culture of the society as a whole. On the basis of chance alone, As will become more influential in some A/B encounters, while Bs will be more influential in other such encounters. As a result, some people will emerge from A/B encounters with status beliefs favoring As, while others will form beliefs favoring Bs. At the macrolevel, the aggregate result of such conflicting beliefs could just be cultural "noise." Furthermore, when as many people form beliefs favoring Bs as As from A/B encounters, participants are likely to find their fledgling beliefs contradicted and undermined in their subsequent A/B encounters. In this situation, widely shared status beliefs about the A/B distinction will not emerge even though interactional experiences induce local level beliefs.

Status construction theory argues, however, that interactional processes will lead to widely shared status beliefs if some "tipping" or biasing factor is present that gives people from one group (either As or Bs) a systematic advantage in gaining influence over those from the other group in A/B encounters. It is for this reason that the theory focuses on the structural conditions within which A/B encounters are embedded in the society. These conditions govern the terms on which As and Bs encounter one another in the society and thus the advantages they have in gaining influence in those encounters. Structural conditions affect as well the frequency with which As and Bs encounter one another and therefore, the opportunities that exist for interactional processes to induce and spread status beliefs.

Structural Conditions and the Terms of Encounters

Many, including Max Weber (1922/1968), have observed that one group's acquisition of superior material resources compared to another group is a common precondition for the emergence of status beliefs favoring the resource advantaged group. This observation posits that the development of a particular structural condition in society, an inequality in the distribution of material resources between As and Bs, leads to the development of shared status beliefs about the A/B distinction. Status construction theory was initially formulated to explain this common observation (Ridgeway, 1991). It sought to specify how interactional processes could transform a structural inequality in resources (say 60% of As are rich but only 40% of Bs are similarly rich) into widely shared beliefs that As are more worthy and competent than Bs are even when Bs equal As in resources.

The theory argues that an inequality in the distribution of resources between As and Bs provides a "tipping" factor that causes microlevel belief formation processes to yield macrolevel cultural beliefs. Several expectation states studies have shown that in goal-oriented encounters differences in actors' resources or rewards (e.g., pay level) lead them to infer corresponding differences in their competence in the situation (Cook, 1975; Harrod, 1980; Stewart & Moore, 1992). As a result, resource-advantaged actors tend to assert themselves more confidently in the situation, while the resource-disadvantaged hesitate and defer, creating influence hierarchies favoring the resource-advantaged actors. In effect, resource differences, by biasing the development of influence hierarchies, constrain the terms on which people encounter one another. If more As are resource rich than Bs in society, then more As than Bs will have a systematic advantage in gaining influence in A/B encounters. As a result, A/B encounters in the society will more often induce status beliefs favoring As than Bs.

Subsequent developments in status construction theory by Webster and Hysom (1998) and Mark (1999) have suggested that there should be, on a logical basis, a general group of "tipping factors" in addition to resource inequalities that also cause interactional processes to create widely shared status beliefs. For clarity, however, I will follow through with the example of resource inequalities to illustrate the theory's macrolevel arguments about structural conditions and "tipping" factors.

The theory argues that structural conditions have two types of macrolevel effects that are important for the emergence of status beliefs. First, structural conditions affect the rate of A/B encounters in the population and thus the opportunities for interactional processes to create and spread status beliefs. Second, structural conditions shape the terms on which these encounters occur by affecting the likelihood that As and Bs in an encounter differ in resources, and if they do, the likelihood that one group rather than the other will have the resource advantage in the encounter.

To specify how structural conditions in a society affect the rate and terms of A/B encounters in the population, status construction borrows arguments from Blau's structural theory of association. Blau (1977) (Blau & Schwartz, 1984) argues that rates of intergroup contact can be calculated from the way people's effective preferences for associating with similar others are constrained by the availability of similar and different others in the population. Blau's formulation alerts us to several structural parameters that affect the rate of encounters in the population between As and Bs and the terms of these encounters based on resource similarities or differences. The distribution of the population across categories of the A/B distinction (i.e., the ratio of As to Bs in the population) and across resource categories (i.e., the ratio of rich to poor in population) will affect the frequency with which As and Bs interact as well as the likelihood that they are similar or different in resource level. The

strength of the correlation between resources and the A/B distinction also shapes the proportion of encounters between As and Bs that are “doubly dissimilar” in that the As and Bs also differ in resources. The correlation particularly affects the percentage of doubly dissimilar encounters in which As rather than Bs are resource advantaged. Finally, the effective strengths of people’s preferences (if any) for associating with similar others on either the A/B dimension or the resource dimension further constrain the rate of A/B encounters, especially those that are “doubly dissimilar” encounters.¹ Skvoretz (1983) provides a formalization of Blau’s argument that allows us to calculate the likelihood of encounters of various types (e.g., between rich As and poor Bs or rich As and rich Bs) under different assumptions about the structural conditions that prevail in the population within which the encounters occur. Ridgeway and Balkwell (1997) draw on this logic to create computer simulations of the processes described by status construction theory. These simulations suggest that if interactional processes do induce people to form and spread status beliefs as the theory suggests, then widely shared status beliefs are a logical outcome under many structural conditions.

DOUBLY DISSIMILAR ENCOUNTERS AND WIDELY SPREAD BELIEFS. To see why this might be so, let us trace through the process by which a correlation between resources and the A/B distinction leads to widely shared beliefs that As are more status worthy and competent than Bs. As we saw earlier, the key to the development of status beliefs that are widely shared rather than local and contradictory is the operation of some “tipping” factor that systematically biases the development of influence hierarchies in encounters between As and Bs. Following this logic, the theory singles out those encounters between As and Bs where the participants also differ in resources as the primary engines behind the development of widely shared beliefs. Since when actors differ in resources, the resource-advantaged actor tends to become more influential, these “doubly dissimilar” encounters induce their participants to form status beliefs that favor the social group of the advantaged actor.

Some doubly dissimilar encounters will be between rich As and poor Bs; others will involve rich Bs and poor As. Thus, like other A/B encounters, doubly dissimilar encounters will produce some contradictory beliefs that are likely to undermine each other and dissipate.² However, because of the correlation between resources and the A/B distinction, there will always be more doubly dissimilar encounters between rich As and poor Bs than rich Bs and poor As. As a result, in the population as a whole, ongoing doubly dissimilar encounters will produce a continual surplus of status beliefs favoring As.

The surplus of status beliefs favoring As produced in doubly dissimilar encounters has the potential to spread widely in the population because other types of encounters either produce no status beliefs about the A/B distinction (because they are not intergroup encounters) or produce a random mix of contradictory beliefs. As actors carry the status beliefs formed in doubly dissimilar encounters to other A/B encounters and act on them there, they spread their beliefs to at least some others. At the same time, actors in the population are continually circulating in and out of doubly dissimilar encounters. This disproportionately fosters the dominant status belief favoring As and disproportionately reinforces the beliefs of those who have already acquired the dominant status belief. Of course, actors with any form of the status belief may encounter another who challenges and undermines that belief. Yet, due to the correlation, disconfirming encounters always will be more likely for those who hold status

¹Effective preference refers to the strength with which persons seek out or avoid associates that are similar or different from them on a particular dimension, given the countervailing constraints they face, such as their degree of interdependence with those others for the attainment of valued goals.

²This will occur as long as the correlation between the group (e.g., A/B) distinction and resources is less than perfect.

beliefs favoring Bs than those who hold the dominant belief favoring As. As a result, actors who acquire the dominant belief favoring As will be more likely to hold those beliefs longer and to spread them successfully to more others. In this way, the small advantage for status beliefs favoring As that flows out from doubly dissimilar encounters gradually intensifies, allowing those beliefs to spread throughout the population in a classic diffusion process.

DO DOUBLY DISSIMILAR ENCOUNTERS CREATE STATUS BELIEFS? Clearly, the capacity of doubly dissimilar encounters to induce status beliefs that favor the resource advantaged is essential to status construction theory's argument. It is plausible to assume that such encounters do create such beliefs based on existing evidence that resources differences create influence differences (Cook, 1975; Harrod, 1980; Stewart & Moore, 1992) and that the correspondence between influence and group differences in encounters creates status beliefs (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000). There is more direct evidence, however, that doubly dissimilar encounters do induce participants to form status beliefs favoring the resource-advantaged group.

Ridgeway et al. (1998) created doubly dissimilar decision-making teams with procedures similar to those in the other experiments I have described. Subjects completed a brief background information questionnaire and a test of personal response style in preparation for working with a partner on a team decision-making task. Subjects were then told that based on the information the laboratory has about them they had been assigned to one pay level (either \$8 or \$11) and their partner had been assigned to another pay level (\$11 or \$8), creating a resource difference between all subjects and partners. Subjects also found that they differed from their partners in personal response style, creating a nominal distinction between them.

Subjects and partners then worked as a two-person team on the task. The partner was a confederate who acted confidently and assertively when better paid than the subject, as research suggests people tend to do (Stewart & Moore, 1992). The confederate acted more hesitantly when less well paid than the subject. This behavioral dynamic created influence hierarchies in the teams that favored the pay-advantaged member. According to the theory, this is the condition under which doubly dissimilar encounters should create status beliefs favoring the resource-advantaged group. As in the previous experiments, subjects then participated in a second round of the experiment that replicated the first with a different partner.

After participating in two consistent doubly dissimilar encounters, subjects formed beliefs that "most people" see the typical person from the nominal group that was better paid in the encounters as higher status and more competent but not as considerate as they see the typical person from the lower paid group to be (Ridgeway et al., 1998). Even subjects who were themselves lower paid formed such beliefs. They reported that the typical person in their own group is viewed by most as lower status and less competent than the typical person from their better paid partner's group. Thus, doubly dissimilar encounters induced participants to form status beliefs favoring the resource advantaged group even when these beliefs personally disadvantaged the participants.

OTHER INTERGROUP ENCOUNTERS AND THE SPREAD OF STATUS BELIEFS. Doubly dissimilar encounters are the engine that drives the formation of widely shared beliefs. Such encounters, however, always will be a relatively small proportion of encounters in society, given people's general preferences for associating with similar others. The engine of doubly dissimilar encounters is only sufficient to create widely shared beliefs because its effects are intensified in more common encounters between As and Bs who are similar in resources. As we saw, there is experimental evidence that in encounters among resource similar As and Bs, a

believer who treats people from the other group in a status-evaluated way can “teach” the status belief to all who are present in the group (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000). Due to this effect, simulations indicate that A/B encounters of three to six people become social dynamos that manufacture believers, greatly speeding the diffusion process (Ridgeway & Balkwell, 1997). These simulations show that, because of the power of encounters to teach and spread status beliefs, even a modest correlation between the group distinction and resources (or another tipping factor) is sufficient to create roughly consensual status beliefs under most structural conditions.

The process of teaching and spreading status beliefs in encounters between As and Bs who are similar in resources is important in another way as well. It is only through such encounters that people who are “off diagonal” from the correlation (e.g., poor As and rich Bs) acquire the dominant status belief favoring As. Their own doubly dissimilar encounters do not foster the dominant status belief, but their more frequent encounters with resource-similar others who hold the dominant belief can pressure them into adopting that belief as well. Rich women, for instance, do not learn that it is low status to be a woman from their encounters with poor men. They learn it from the treatment they receive in their more common encounters with rich men.

There is some evidence that off-diagonal people indeed can acquire the dominant status belief from being treated according to that belief by nominally different but resource-similar others. As part of their larger experiment, Ridgeway and Erickson (2000, study 1) included a set of conditions where subjects, like their nominally distinct partners, were well paid but where they saw evidence that others in the study from their own nominal group had been less well paid than they were. These subjects were in the position of the rich women described above. Their similarly well-paid partners treated them assertively, creating influence hierarchies that disadvantaged the subjects. From these experiences, these off-diagonal subjects, despite being better paid than most in their group and equal in resources to their partner, still formed beliefs that the partner’s nominal group was higher status and more competent in the eyes of most people than their own group was.

TIPPING FACTORS OTHER THAN RESOURCES. This extended description of how interactional processes transform a structural inequality in resources into widely shared status beliefs illustrates status construction theory’s main arguments about the emergence of status beliefs from macrolevel conditions and microlevel experiences. This particular story shows us how the Weberian observation that riches precede group status could come about. On the other hand, the transformation of wealth to status is not the only story that the theory offers. As Webster and Hysom (1998) point out, the theory implies that an inequality in the distribution between nominal groups of any factor that systematically biases the development of influence hierarchies in intergroup encounters will foster the development of status beliefs favoring the advantaged group. Thus, differences between groups in technology or computer literacy or other such factors that give people from one group a systematic edge in gaining influence in intergroup encounters also would foster status beliefs favoring the advantaged group. Webster and Hysom (1998) use this implication of status construction theory to provide an account for how differences in the moral evaluations attached to heterosexuals and homosexuals could be transformed by interactional processes into widely shared status beliefs that heterosexuals not only are more worthy but more competent than homosexuals.

Mark (1999) has observed that it is logically possible for chance processes alone to occasionally act as the tipping factor that fosters status beliefs about a group difference. Even in the absence of an inequality between the groups in some biasing factor like resources or

technology, initial encounters between As and Bs just by chance might come out disproportionately one way. As a series of coin flips occasionally can produce a string of "heads," initial encounters might result in a string of hierarchies favoring Bs. Through the intensifying, "booster" processes described above, the initial preponderance of status beliefs favoring Bs that result from these early encounters could spread and grow until beliefs favoring Bs become widely shared. Note, however, that if status beliefs develop through chance processes, it cannot be predicted in advance which nominal group will end up high status. The development of status beliefs through such chance path-dependent processes is most likely to occur when nominal groups do not differ on a systematic biasing factor such as resources and are just beginning to regularly interact together on a cooperative basis for the first time.

Applying Status Construction Theory

For purposes of logical clarity, status construction theory is phrased as an account of the emergence of status beliefs about nominal groups or categories of people who must regularly interact to achieve mutual goals. It is important to recognize, however, that the structure of the argument as an account of the initial development of status beliefs is a logical convenience only. In fact, the theory describes a set of reciprocal effects between structural conditions and interactional events that are ongoing (see Ridgeway, 1991). As a result, the theory can be applied to the maintenance or erosion of status beliefs about social groups as much as to the emergence of these beliefs. The theory, for instance, may offer some help in understanding the emergence of new status beliefs about the so-called digital divide between the computer knowledgeable and the computer ignorant. At the same time, it also can offer insights about the way differences in computer literacy are refreshing and fortifying existing status beliefs based on gender and race.

Indeed, one of the more useful applications of status construction theory may be to the problem of understanding how status beliefs about social groups are sometimes maintained in society despite major transformations in the material conditions that appear to maintain them. Gender status beliefs in Western societies, for instance, are sufficiently ancient that we can speculate only about their precise origin. We cannot say whether the processes described by status construction theory were implicated in the origin of gender status beliefs. We can say, however, that these processes are likely to have been and continue to be a factor in the maintenance of gender status beliefs. Men as a group have had and continue to have a larger share of material resources than women in Western societies. This factor alone constrains interaction between men and women in such a fashion as to continually reproduce widely shared beliefs that men are more worthy and competent than women. Even if the original sources of gender status beliefs disappear or lose significance, status construction theory predicts that existing resource differences between men and women are sufficient to continually construct gender status beliefs.

Gender status beliefs in fact have been preserved in Western societies despite profound socioeconomic transformations such as industrialization and the more recent entry of women into the paid labor force. Interactional status processes such as those described by expectation states and status construction theories arguably have played a significant part in these preservation process (Ridgeway, 1997).

Consider a situation where widespread structural changes in society, such as economic, technological, or social organization changes, cause a decline in existing distributional inequalities between men and women in material resources (or another factor that biases

influence in encounters). In these circumstances, interactional experiences that disconfirm people's gender status beliefs will become more frequent. There will be more mixed sex encounters where, for instance, a woman has sufficient resource advantages to override her gender status so that she becomes men's actual superior in situational power and prestige (Pugh & Wahrman, 1983; Wagner & Berger, 1997).

Unless structural change produces a rapid outright reversal in the distributional inequalities so that the inequalities now favor women, however, the rate of reversal interactions that result may not confront enough people with enough disconfirming experiences to permanently undermine gender status beliefs except over a long period. Once status beliefs are established as part of the taken-for-granted consensual culture, evidence suggests that repeated disconfirmations are necessary to erode them (Hewstone, 1994; Rothbart & John, 1985). This is partly because such beliefs tend to have self-fulfilling effects on perceptions and because those who benefit from the beliefs tend to be cognitively resistant to disconfirming information (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990)³ As a consequence, change in the evaluative content and consensuality of gender status beliefs is likely to substantially lag behind changes in the distributional inequalities that maintain them (Ridgeway, 1997).

This lag in the change of gender beliefs creates a transitional interval during which, even as societal changes mitigate the former distributional inequality, gender status beliefs continue to shape most mixed-sex encounters. As they do, these beliefs frame the interactional contexts through which new or different resources are allocated and opportunities in emerging organizational forms are distributed. In this way, gender status is rewritten into newly developing economic and organizational forms. Men effectively retain their advantage over women in power and resources within these new forms, although their degree of advantage may be altered in some way. The new forms of distributional inequalities thus created between men and women in turn conserve the basic evaluative order of gender status beliefs that favors men despite the social change that has occurred (Ridgeway, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Cultural beliefs about the evaluative standing of social groups in society are probably both created and maintained by a variety of macrolevel and microlevel social processes, not all of which are mediated by interaction among individuals. Status construction theory focuses exclusively on one path by which status beliefs develop and change: that of interaction between people from different but interdependent social groups that is constrained by the structural conditions that affect those groups. The point of the theory, however, is that even if other factors also may produce widely shared status beliefs, the processes described by status construction theory are sufficient in themselves to create such beliefs. As a result, they must be taken into account in understanding how status beliefs develop and change in society. Status beliefs, after all, have life histories. It used to be low status to be Irish in the United States, but this belief has dissipated as Irishness has been folded into "whiteness." New status beliefs develop, as may be happening currently with computer literacy.

The processes described by status construction theory reveal an intimate and ongoing mutual determination between macrolevel status beliefs about the evaluation of social groups

³Such evidence suggests that there is an asymmetry between the relative pliability of status beliefs in the initial period when an individual first acquires them and later when an individual not only takes the beliefs for granted personally but presumes that the larger culture does as well.

and microlevel hierarchies of esteem and influence among actors. As expectation states theory has long demonstrated, status beliefs about social groups powerfully shape hierarchies of esteem and influence among actors (Berger et al., 1977; Webster & Foschi, 1988). Status construction theory, in turn, argues that these hierarchies have the power to construct and reconstruct status beliefs about social groups. The local constructions of reality that emerge in intergroup encounters create powerfully persuasive experiences for participants that induce them to form and act on status beliefs about the social groups to which they belong. This occurs even when these status beliefs disadvantage participants' own groups.

When a structural condition such as an inequality in resources systematically constrains the terms on which intergroup encounters occur, the interactional experiences that result transform that structural condition into widely held status beliefs favoring the resource-advantaged group. Once established, such status beliefs benefit individual members of that group even when those members do not personally command superior resources. Thus, although status beliefs are created out of a structural inequality, once they become widely held in society, they define an independent status distinction that creates social cleavages that are not fully reducible to economic or other differences.

Status construction theory has the benefit of offering a systematic account of the emergence and change of status beliefs where few such theories have yet been proposed. By describing some of the ways that status relations between groups and status hierarchies among individuals interconnect, the theory takes a step toward the larger goal of developing a comprehensive account of inequality based on status. If we are to develop a comprehensive understanding of status as a fundamental dimension of inequality and social cleavage in complex societies, we will require many more such theoretical steps.

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