Why Does Status Matter for Inequality?

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Finding Mechanisms

• Need to **open up** the study of inequality
  ▫ 1. Integrate
    • Cultural as well as material processes
    • Group difference based and socioeconomic inequality
  ▫ 2. Look across levels of analysis
    • Powerful, obdurate mechanisms behind broad patterns of inequality emerge from the interaction of processes at multiple levels

• **Status** as a significant **mechanism** of inequality.
  ▫ Examples: Gender, race, class lifestyle.
Misjudging the Significance of Status

- **Inequality** based honor, esteem, and respect

- Not seen as an **independent** causal mechanism

- **Limits** our ability to understand:
  - What’s at stake in inequality
    - Power of status as a **micro-motive** for behavior
  - How status based social differences (race, gender, class life style) interpenetrate organizations of resources
  - How structures of inequality persist
Why Has Status Been Difficult to Integrate?

- **Status** is based on *cultural* beliefs about “types” (categories) of people rather than directly on material arrangements.
  - One type (e.g., men) more esteemed and believed more competent than a contrasting type (women).

- **Cultural** status beliefs affect inequality primarily through *social relational* processes.

- **Contrasts** with materialist and structural approaches of most stratification accounts.
Status, Difference, and the Stability of Inequality

- **Tilly: Durable** inequality requires that control over resources be consolidated with a categorical *difference* like race, gender, or “life style.”

- **Consolidation** leads to cultural *status beliefs* about the difference that legitimate inequality between the groups.

- Contemporary status beliefs *legitimate* by linking not just respect but presumed *competence* with dominant categories of people.
Status Increases the Significance of Social Difference

- Focus on types of people as a basis for inequality exaggerates social differences.

- Pre-existing differences (ethnicity, sex) may be recruited and transformed to become status distinctions.

- Differences may be entirely constructed to assert superiority of the richer and more powerful (e.g., class life style).
But Status Also Matters Because:

• Status beliefs constitute a social difference as an **independent** dimension of inequality with its own sustaining social dynamic.

• This autonomous dynamic:
  ▫ Operates at the **interpersonal** level of self-other expectations, judgments, and behavior.
  ▫ Continually reproduces inequalities in material outcomes based on the social difference.
  ▫ ** Writes** difference based inequality into organizational structures of resources and power.
Status Beliefs

• A central component of stereotypes of groups by which inequality is patterned in the U. S. (Fiske et al. 2002).
  ▫ Consensual cultural beliefs about what “most people” think.
    • Expect others to judge you by them, so must take them into account in your own behavior.

• In social relations, create 3 effects that are independently consequential for resource and power inequality:
  ▫ status biases
  ▫ associational preference biases
  ▫ reactions to status challenges
Status Biases

- Status beliefs shape expectations for competence and authority when salient and/or relevant in the setting.
  - Cross-difference encounters (mixed sex, race, or class).
  - Gender, race, or class typed settings (e.g., elite universities for race and class, engineering classrooms for gender).

- Self-fulfilling effects on perceived ability, assertive behavior, task performance, influence, rewards
Consequences of Status Biases

- **Shape** both “supply” and “demand” side of people’s everyday efforts to attain resources and positions of power.

- **Biasing** effects **accumulate** through multiple encounters in consequential contexts (schools, workplace, health organizations).
  - **Shape life outcomes**
  - Implicitly “reveal” those from privileged status groups as “better” and more deserving of rewards.

- Because the production of **who is “better”** is **implicit**, status **legitimizes** inequality in a meritocratic society.
Associational Biases

- Status beliefs create an **incentive** to associate with high status others.
  - Intensifies in-group biases of high status groups.
  - Low status groups **torn** between own group solidarity and preferring those from high status groups.

- Feeds “**cloning**” by high status actors in positions of power.

- Creates network **barriers** for low status actors.
Resistance to Status Challenges

- Status beliefs motivate high status group members to defend their “sense of group position” (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999).
  - Hostile, “backlash” reactions to assertively dominant behavior from white women and African-American men.
    - Constrains access to leadership positions for low status group members.
  - Impedes social advancement of low status group members that would undermine the status hierarchy.
Status Processes as Mechanisms of Inequality

• Tilly: Dominant groups maintain inequality through exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

• Tells us more about the “why” (the interests of dominant groups) than the “how” (specific mechanisms).

• Status bias, associational bias, and resistance to status challenges in social relations:
  ▫ Specific, subtle, but powerful mechanisms by which exploitation and opportunity hoarding are actually accomplished by high status groups.
Example 1: Gendering Organizations

- **How** are gendered assumptions about ideal workers and the lesser value of women’s work written into workplace structures and practices?
  - **Key** to the gender wage and authority gap and the household division of labor.

- **Root mechanism**: gender status and associational biases working “in the room” as the new structure or practice is developed.
  - Interpersonal decision-making context in which pay-setting systems were developed (Nelson and Bridges 1999).
  - Persist and spread through institutional processes.
Gendering Sites of Innovation

• **Sites** where new types of work or new forms of living are invented
  ▫ Small, interpersonal, outside established organizations.

• **Uncertainty** of innovative task, interpersonal setting increase the likelihood that participants draw on the convenient, familiar cultural **frame of gender** to help organize new ways of working or living.

• Reinscribes **gender status assumptions** into newly emerging activities, forms of organization.

• **Reinvents** gender inequality for the new era.
Example 2: Class Status and “Gateway Interactions”

- **Consequential** encounters in organizations that mediate access to valued life outcomes.
  - Ex: job interviews, encounters with school officials, doctor visits.

- **Dominant** actors and implicit **cultural rules** of gateway organizations are distinctively **middle class**.

- **Gateway** interactions are cross-difference for **working class** petitioners, evoking implicit **status biases**.
  - **MC doctor assumes WC patient is less competent**, prescribes simpler, less effective treatment (Luftey and Freese 2005).
  - WC mother and son’s visit to pediatrician is constrained and uneasy, produces **limited health feedback from the doctor** (Lareau 2002).
Example 3: Challenges to the Racial Status Hierarchy

• Immigration, changing U. S. demographics **challenge** the racial status order.

• Predict whites will react to perceived racial hierarchy threat with political efforts to **defend** the racial status order.

  ▫ **Willer et al. (2013)** internet experiments:  
    • **Whites** (but not nonwhites) who saw graphs of whites’ declining income advantage reported greater support for the Tea Party.

    • After threatening demographic projections, whites (not nonwhites) identified more with the Tea Party when it was linked to **racial order polices** (immigration controls, welfare cuts, etc.)
Conclusions

• Neglecting status has limited our ability to understand how inequality, particularly **durable** inequality, is **made**.

• It is status that drives **group** differences (gender, race, class life style) as axes of inequality.

• **Macro-level** cultural status beliefs shape **micro-level** social relations that:
  - Weld group differences to positions of power and resources in consequential institutions.
  - Give inequality based on group differences staying power over social and economic transformations.
  - Legitimate the structure of inequality by implicitly constructing who is “better.”