

# Why Does Status Matter for Inequality?

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A decorative graphic consisting of a thick red horizontal bar that spans the width of the slide. Below this bar, on the right side, are several thin, parallel white horizontal lines of varying lengths, creating a stepped or layered effect.

# 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 life style.**

# 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).**
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  - **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.”**