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# The status value theory of power and mechanisms of micro stratification: Theory and new experimental evidence

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## ABSTRACT

This paper employs sociological theories of status and power to explore the mechanisms wherein status characteristics produce power in exchange relations. Theories in the status and exchange literature suggest that status characteristics produce power most strongly when actors possess (i) multiple differentiating status characteristics, and (ii) multiple resources. An experiment manipulating these factors finds that the former is related to expectations of competence while the latter induces perceptions of status value — mechanisms whereby status produces power. A second experiment manipulates the race and gender of the participants enabling white males to negotiate with African-American females in dyads. This study produces some of the largest dyadic power differences ever reported in micro sociology. These findings have implications for the mechanisms of power from Thye's (2000a) status value theory of power and Berger and Fisek's (2006) formal theory of status value. More generally, this research bears on the rudimentary foundations of social stratification in groups both small and large.

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## 1. Introduction

Sociological concerns with the causes and consequences of micro and macro stratification are as old as the discipline itself (Weber [1916] 1946; Parsons, 1963). Although clear progress has been made toward understanding the seeds of social stratification, paradoxically, we also know that ample inequality still persists (by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, educational attainment) among various measures of well-being, including wealth, employment, occupation, life expectancy, incarceration, housing, home ownership, mortgage interest rates, quality of education, infant mortality, and so forth (Carr and Kutty, 2008; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006). And while substantial literatures in sociology and economics document these phenomena, the exact mechanisms wherein social characteristics like race and gender are transformed into disadvantages are still debatably under-investigated. This project contributes to a broader effort to understand how mechanisms of micro stratification operate *in vitro*. Specifically, theories of power and status from micro sociology are used to theorize and experimentally test two distinct mechanisms whereby status distinctions translate into power advantages for some but not others. These theories converge to ultimately suggest that basic structural conditions (i.e., the nature of resources and traits possessed by individuals) unleash perceptions and expectations that yield micro stratification.

The analysis to follow has broad theoretical applicability. Power and status are fundamental sociological concepts that traverse macro theories of inequality (Weber [1916] 1946; Lenski, 1966; Marx and Engels [1848] 1888), meso theories of

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culture and system analysis (Parsons, 1963; Turner, 2000), and micro theories of social interaction (Berger and Fisek, 2006; Collins, 1975, 1981; Kemper, 1984; Kemper and Collins, 1990). Across these levels, scholars have primarily assumed that power and status are independent dimensions of stratification, each capturing a different facet of social inequality (Zelditch, 1992). Whereas *power* is typically portrayed as a potential that allows some to extract valued resources at the expense of others (Emerson, 1981; Molm, 1990; Willer, 1981, 1999), *status* refers to one's position in a social hierarchy based on levels of prestige, honor and influence (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway and Walker, 1995). This demarcation is also reflected in contemporary micro sociological theories of power and status.

This paper contributes to the larger literature on power and status by testing and theorizing structural conditions and mechanisms whereby status translates into power. It does so by building upon a *status value theory of power* (Thye, 2000a; Thye et al., 2006; Thye et al., 2008) that explains how status characteristics such as gender or race create power differences that advantage high status individuals who negotiate with lower status others. The theory identifies one important mechanism that affords high status actors a comparative power advantage – the spread of status value from a person to a goal object (see Thye, 2000a; Berger and Fisek, 2006; 2013). Briefly, the theory claims that goal objects (e.g., resources, items, goods) held by higher status actors are perceived to be more valuable than those held by lower status actors. Because of this phenomenon, higher status actors are able to extract better prices for goods they possess, and in the process of doing so, effectively leverage power. The upshot is that status characteristics induce perceptions and cognitions that bring status and power hierarchies into alignment.

In what follows we theorize and experimentally investigate three issues regarding status-driven power. First, we empirically examine two of the four scope conditions from the original status value theory of power (Thye, 2000a). These two are selected because the theory suggests that the spread of status value will occur most prominently when individuals possess *multiple* differentiating status characteristics allocated in a consistent manner (all high, all low) and *multiple* differentiating resources (Berger et al., 1972; Berger and Fisek, 2006; Ridgeway, 1991, 2000; Thye, 2000a; Thye et al., 2006). Second, we examine if multiple status characteristics produce greater differentiation on expectations of competence in an exchange context; and if multiple differentiating resources activate perceptions of status value. At issue here are two different mechanisms whereby status produces power. Third, we seek to replicate one key experimental condition and finding reported by Thye (2000a).

A second experiment is reported that was inspired by questions arising from the first. This experiment assesses if certain combinations of status characteristics are more or less potent in producing power differences in negotiations. Status characteristics theory asserts that the status value affixed to an individual's characteristics is situationally bound and culturally unique (Berger et al., 1977). That is, what is a diffuse status characteristic in one setting or culture may or may not be as potent in another (e.g., “elderly” is the negatively-valued state of age in the United States but the positively-valued state of age in Korea). Building on the first study, we report data from a second study wherein race and gender replace age and education as the diffuse status characteristics under investigation. The results of this study afford important insights into the combinations of status characteristics most likely to trigger power differences.

## 2. Background

Various lines of evidence suggest fundamental connections between power and status. Scholars of large-scale inequality have consistently documented macro relations between one's status and one's power (Frank, 1985). For instance, blends of status and power undergird and reinforce labor market trends that create gender wage disparities. Over the past 40 years women consistently have earned less than men in the U.S. workforce. Today, the average woman earns only 77 cents for every dollar earned by a male counterpart (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Mounting evidence suggests that gender status affects a broad array of factors related to power in negotiation and exchange. Some work suggests that women are less likely to negotiate than men (Babcock and Laschever, 2003) and score lower on measures of bargaining propensity (Schneider et al., 1999).

Given these real world disparities a key question remains: What are the structural conditions and theoretical mechanisms that produce such differences? Stuhlmacher and Walters (1999) suggest that disadvantages for lower status individuals are driven by dual forces: *expectations* and *perceptions* that advantage those higher in status. Modern sociological theories agree, but go a step further in identifying more precisely the kinds of expectations and perceptions that matter. Specifically, these theories suggest that *performance expectations* (Berger et al., 1974, 1977; Thye et al., 2006) and *status value perceptions* (Berger and Fisek, 2006; 2013; Thye, 2000a; Thye et al., 2006) are explicit mechanisms linking status to power.

### 2.1. Mechanism 1: performance expectations

The *status characteristics and expectation states* research program emphasizes the role of *performance expectations* in producing a range of behaviors (Berger et al., 1974; Berger et al., 1985a,b). *Status characteristics theory* (hereafter SCT) is one branch of the larger expectation states program that connects culturally specified beliefs to performance expectations. The theory conceptualizes two kinds of status characteristics. *Diffuse status characteristics* exist when (i) there are two or more states that are differentially evaluated; (ii) each state is associated with specific performance expectations of the same valence; and (iii) each state is associated with general expectations of the same valence. For example, gender is a diffuse status characteristic when one state (male) is more highly valued than the other state (female), when men are expected to be more

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