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### Status differentiation

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# Chapter 6

## General Discussion and Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

Status differentiation is a phenomenon that can affect both individuals and social groups and that can be observed in virtually all human collectives, no matter how small or large. Given this ubiquity, much sociological research has examined the conditions under which differences emerge in the social worth and competence that individuals and social groups are attributed. Despite this plethora of research, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge as to how status differentiation comes about. In this dissertation, I aimed to narrow some of these gaps. In four studies, separated in two parts, I studied some processes involved in the emergence of status differentiation between social groups (Chapters 2 and 3) and in the emergence of status differentiation between individuals (Chapters 4 and 5).

In Part 1, I argued that earlier theoretical research on the emergence of status differentiation between social groups has neglected some of the complexities involved in the emergence of status differentiation. Earlier research suggests that during face-to-face interactions in small groups with a collective task focus, status differentiation can emerge spontaneously between individual members. If this differentiation accidentally coincides with differences in a salient social distinction (e.g., gender, race, or ethnicity) individuals can come to believe that differences in the distinction signify differences in social worth and competence. Once such a status belief has emerged, it can spread throughout society, because belief-holders treat new interaction partners in line with it and thereby teach it to others (Mark et al., 2009; Ridgeway, 1991). The emergence and diffusion processes described by earlier research involve decentralized interactions between large numbers of individuals that occur simultaneously in different parts of society. To make these processes analytically tractable, earlier research made several simplifying assumptions about the way interactions occur in both small groups and large populations. I argued that by relaxing some of these simplifying assumptions, we could gain important new insights into the conditions under which status differentiation between social groups emerges.

In Part 2, I argued that earlier empirical research on the emergence of status differentiation between individuals is limited by its reliance on laboratory studies that centered on groups with a collective task focus. The choice of laboratory settings and the emphasis on groups with a collective task focus undoubtedly have important advantages. First, the use of laboratory settings makes it possible to study the processes involved in the emergence of status differentiation, while controlling for other factors that might intervene in these processes. Second, the concentration on groups with a collective task focus has made it possible to develop a set of analytically sharp assumptions and propositions that are highly consistent within a task focused context. However, I argued that reliance on ad hoc created laboratory groups with a collective task focus has limited the generalizability of the insights that earlier research has

generated. Put differently, to date we know little about how status differentiation between individuals comes about in groups that exist outside the laboratory and do not have a collective task focus.

In this concluding chapter, I first summarize how I addressed the foregoing shortcomings in the two parts of this book and discuss the main findings. Subsequently, I discuss the implications of these findings and provide an outlook for future research.

## **6.2 Summary of Main Findings**

### **6.2.1 Part I: The complexity of status construction processes**

In Chapter 2, I studied the conditions under which beliefs about the relative social worth and competence of members of different social categories emerge from interactions in groups with a collective task focus (Research Question 1). To this end, I developed an agent-based computational model that implemented behavioral and cognitive processes involved in the emergence of status differentiation, as described in the expectation states framework and status construction theory. The development of this model was induced by earlier modeling work presented by Mark et al. (2009). In this earlier work, the authors showed theoretically that task focused interactions in small groups might lead to the spontaneous emergence and diffusion of status beliefs in larger populations. I argued that one shortcoming of this earlier work was that it had focused on interactions in dyads as the smallest possible group in which status differentiation between members of different social categories can emerge. Consequently, we have little knowledge about how the behavioral and cognitive process that the expectation states framework and status construction theory describe affect the emergence of status differentiation between members of different social categories in groups larger than dyads.

Systematic computational experimentation with the new agent-based model suggested that the cognitive and behavioral processes that the expectation states framework and status construction theory describe have a strong tendency to generate status beliefs, also in groups larger than dyads. However, this tendency becomes weaker as group size increases, and is stronger when groups interact for a very short or very long amount of time. Additionally, I explored the possibility that status beliefs might affect the interactions in the context in which they had emerged (i.e. in the groups in which they were acquired). I found that if this would be the case, status beliefs would be much more likely to remain stable once they have emerged.

In Chapter 3, I examined whether spatial clustering in the network of task focused interactions in larger populations might affect the emergence and diffusion of status beliefs. Specifically, I examined whether spatial network clustering facilitates the emergence of regional variation in the status values that salient social distinctions have (Research Question 2). Earlier modeling work by Ridgeway and Balkwell (1997) and Mark et al. (2009) suggests that the cognitive and behavioral processes that the expectation states framework and status construction theory describe might have a strong tendency to generate status beliefs that might become widely consensual in any population. I argued that this implication of the theoretical assumptions that earlier research has used might be due to the simplifying assumption that task focused interactions occur at random between any two members of the larger population. I

suggested that once we take into account that task focused interaction tends to be clustered spatially, the diffusion processes might not be so strong anymore, and instead might lead to regional variation in status beliefs. To assess the logical consistency of this argument, I developed an agent-based computational model that was largely based on the formal model presented by Mark et al. (2009).

Computational experimentation with the new model suggested that if interaction networks are spatially clustered, the behavioral and cognitive processes that the expectation states framework and status construction theory describe still have a strong tendency to spontaneously create status beliefs. However, in line with my expectations, these beliefs were likely to show a high level of regional variation. Unexpectedly, this outcome crucially depended on a cognitive assumption of status construction theory that earlier modeling work has largely neglected. Specifically, regional variation in status values in the presence of spatial network clustering is only likely to occur when individuals do not require their experiences on which a given status belief is based to be very consistent. That is, regional variation in status values is likely to occur when individuals adopt a status belief as soon as a slight majority of their past interactional experiences supports this belief. By contrast, when almost all of their past interactions are needed to support a given belief, regional variation in status values is unlikely to occur. This is because if individuals acquire a status belief only when there is very consistent support for it, it becomes very unlikely that they acquire any status beliefs *at all*. This also undermines the formation of regional variation in status values.

### **6.2.2 Part II: The laboratory and scope conditions**

In Chapter 4, I examined the conditions under which members of task focused groups outside the laboratory are willing to respect high performing group members (Research Question 3). Specifically, I examined how the level of task interdependence and informal interdependence that the members of organizational teams experience affect the extent to which they make their respect for their colleagues contingent on the performance of these colleagues. Earlier management research has implicitly assumed that the members of organizational teams will always be willing to 'reward' performance with respect. I highlighted that this willingness might crucially depend on the level of task interdependence that individual team members experience. The reason is that conferring respect to others is a potentially costly act, given that it might lower the status of the conferring individual in the team. Consequently, team members might only be willing to confer respect for performance if they expect that this might indirectly benefit themselves. This, I argued, is only the case when the level of task interdependence that team members experience is high. Additionally, I highlighted that individuals value the friendship and social support of their immediate colleagues, whereas status differentiation can undermine both friendship and support. I argued that making the respect for others contingent on their performance might thus have an additional cost attached, at least when individuals are well integrated into their respective team. This cost, in turn, might make them reluctant to make their regard for others contingent on performance. Evidently, in the short-lived and artificial context of the laboratory, such motivations might not matter. However, in the context of enduring groups outside the laboratory such motives might be crucial for the status allocation

process.

The empirical assessment of the foregoing hypotheses supported the prediction that the level of task interdependence that individual team members experience affects their willingness to reward performance with respect. That is, the results suggested that the members of the organizational teams that I examined were more likely to reward the performance of their colleagues with respect when they perceived that the successful completion of their own tasks depended on the performance of others. By contrast, the level of informal interdependence that respondents experienced only increased the general level of respect they had for their direct colleagues, but it did not moderate the relation between performance and respect.

In Chapter 5, finally, I studied the way in which status characteristics affect the ability and competence attributions in enduring groups that do not have a collective task focus (Research Question 4). Earlier experimental research suggests that status characteristics might affect such attributions either through a process of status generalization or through a process of constrained in-group favoritism. I argued that this latter process might be particularly strong in groups that do not have a collective task focus (such as school classes). The reason is that the lack of strong functional pressures to evaluate the abilities of others accurately might increase individuals' inclination to engage in behaviors that aim at improving their self-image (i.e. engaging in in-group favoritism).

I assessed both processes for the status characteristics gender and ethnicity, in the context of Hungarian school classes. In the larger Hungarian society, both gender and ethnicity are assumed to be status characteristics, each creating two groups of individuals of which one is status-advantaged (men and Hungarians) and one is status-disadvantaged (women and Roma). Unexpectedly, in the case of gender, the results did not support the notion that belonging to either of the two categories affects the abilities and competence that others attribute to individuals. In the case of ethnicity, by contrast, the results suggested that this characteristic affects ability attributions through a process of status generalization.

### **6.3 Discussion and Outlook for Future Research**

The studies presented in this dissertation have several important implications for research on the emergence of status differentiation between individuals and social groups and point to a number of promising new research directions. From a theoretical point of view, the findings presented in Chapters 2 and 3 together suggest that status construction processes might be a powerful force in the *creation* of status differentiation between social groups in *local contexts*, but they might not be as powerful in *diffusing* such status differentiation throughout the *population*, depending on the social structural context conditions in which they occur. The first insight is in line with existing empirical and theoretical work on status construction processes. That is, earlier work suggests that in small group contexts, face-to-face interactions between members of different social categories might easily create the belief that members of one category are more respectable and more competent than members of another category. My simulation experiments suggest that this might even hold in groups considerably larger than the groups that were the focus of earlier research. The second insight gained from the work presented here, by contrast, diverges from the results of earlier modeling work, which suggests

that status beliefs can spread easily once they have emerged. However, I considered the larger social structure in which task focused interactions occur in the form of the spatial clustering of interaction networks. This dissertation therefore points to new boundary conditions under which processes of status differentiation between individuals can lead to status differentiation between social groups in the population.

The research that underlies the foregoing insights is purely theoretical and future research might generate intriguing new insights when putting the predictions generated here to the empirical test. A first step in this direction would be to amend current experimental designs so that the emergence of status beliefs from face-to-face interactions can be examined in groups that exist in parallel to each other and whose members occasionally interact across group boundaries. This adjustment would be an important first step toward studying the emergence and diffusion of status beliefs in ‘locally clustered’ interactions under controlled conditions. Outside the laboratory, existing survey data could be used to test some of the predictions presented here. For example, Brashears (2008) used data from the International Social Survey to assess how country level variation in the possession of resources and power can be related to variation in status differences between social groups (i.e. between men and women). By moving from a focus on *between country variation* to a focus on *within country variation*, this earlier research could be extended to assess how much of the existing within country variation in the status differences between men and women might be due to national-level variation in spatial network clustering. The level of spatial network clustering that exists in a given country could be approximated, for example, from information about the level of urban agglomeration and the infrastructure that connects larger cities.

From an empirical point of view, the results presented in Chapters 4 and 5 suggest that some of the principles that lead to the emergence of status differentiation between individuals are less universal than has previously been assumed, whereas others are more general. Specifically, the results presented in Chapter 4 suggest that earlier management research might have been too optimistic about individuals’ willingness to reward performance with respect in task focused settings and that future field research might benefit from paying special attention to the conditions under which a given team operates. For practitioners, the results imply that they might be able to alleviate problems that can arise from status competition based on political behavior by highlighting the task interdependence that exists within a team. Such an increased emphasis on interdependence might make individuals more willing to engage in costly acts of status conferral to the benefit of the team, rather than withholding status from others.

The results presented here suggest that status generalization is a powerful process that affects individuals even in contexts where previous research often did not expect it. Earlier research has revealed that status characteristics would affect the abilities and competence that individuals attribute to others when there are strong functional pressures (i.e. a collective task focus), but my results suggest that it occurs even in the absence of functional pressures. This suggests that status differentiation between social groups translates back to the individual level in more contexts than previously thought. This insight lends further urgency to the recent appeal by Ridgeway that “to understand the mechanisms by which inequality is actually made in

society [...] we need to more thoroughly incorporate the effects of status [...] alongside those based on resources and power” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 12).