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# THE IMPACT OF STATUS DIFFERENCES ON GATEKEEPING: A THEORETICAL BRIDGE AND BASES FOR INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

Gatekeepers control access to benefits which they do not own. When granted access, their clients incur obligations which may take the form of fees. This paper extends previous theoretical work on gatekeeping to status-differentiated relations by jointly applying two theories. Network Exchange Theory (NET) models the gatekeeper–client relation and Status Characteristics Theory (SCT) models the impact of status differences on that relation. The result is three sets of theoretical predictions for experimental investigation. The first set predicts the effects of status influence as it works in the gatekeeper – client relation. The second predicts the effect of inflated or deflated status value of the access on the fees paid by clients. The third set predicts the joint effect of status influence and status value when there are status differences in both gatekeeper – client and client – object relations.

## GATEKEEPER-CLIENT RELATIONS

Gatekeepers control access to 'benefits' they do not own. The benefits are such because 'clients' value them. When granted access, the client assumes obligations which may be discharged by a fee paid to the gatekeeper. In the past, the chamberlain controlled access to the king and could collect handsome fees from those who sought an audience. More recently, Burawoy (1979) describes his frustration with the "tool cage man," who controlled access to needed tools. As the workday began, the tool cage man, acting as gatekeeper, serviced long-term workers first, leaving Burawoy last. Subsequently Burawoy won the Christmas lottery and received a ham which he gave—as a fee—to the tool cage man. From that time on, he was treated in order with the long-term workers.

More formally, a 'gatekeeper' is an actor – or network position -- which controls access to 'benefits' valued by another actor called the 'client' (Corra and Willer 2002:180). [1] The benefit sought by the client might be access to another social relation, such as relation to a king, or it may be access to things, such as tools needed for work.

In exchange networks, gatekeeping takes the form of “ordering,” a “structural power condition” (Corra 2000; Corra and Willer 2002). Structural power conditions are structurally induced differences in opportunities for transactions within a network that has the potential of differentially favoring some actors at the expense of others (Markovsky, Willer and Patton 1988; Corra 2005). Researchers who use Network Exchange Theory (hereafter, NET) define ordering as a relation, like G—C—V, in which C must negotiate successfully with G before it can negotiate with and gain benefits from V (Corra 2000, 2008). A key question for gatekeeper-client relations as such is what determines the fee a gatekeeper (G) can secure from a client (C) for granting access to those who control valued objectives (V). Corra and Willer (2002) show that NET successfully predicts the gatekeeper‘s fee (See below).

I introduce further complexity into the gatekeeper-client relation by varying the social status of clients, gatekeepers and those to whom the client desires access. Recent research by Thye (2000, Thye, Willer and Markovsky 2006) combines ideas drawn from NET and Status Characteristic Theory (hereafter, SCT) but the two theories have not been combined in theoretical works on ordering relations in general or of gatekeeper-client relations specifically, and it is to this task that this paper is directed.

*Status differences and Gatekeeping*

Status differences and gatekeeping have long been closely associated. For example, the position of gatekeeper may be a concomitant of a high status position already held (Corra and Willer 2002). When it is, gatekeeping can increase status inequalities already present. One objective of this paper is to demonstrate, in turn, that the gatekeeper’s fees are amplified by those status differences.

For example, when gatekeeping took the form of patronage in ancient societies, the patron held a privileged position prior to gatekeeping activities. That the patron could gatekeep was a concomitant of the patron’s high status position and the fees – in the form of gifts – received from clients importantly supplemented the patron’s income. Arguably, that income contributed to the social construction of the status value of the patron’s position (Ridgeway 1991, 2000). [2] At issue for this paper is whether, acting as gatekeepers, high status patrons gain more substantial fees than would be gained in the absence of status differences.

Corra and Willer (2002) demonstrated that the gatekeeper’s fee varies with the value to the client of the access sought. The current paper extends that analysis by demonstrating that, for a given access, the gatekeeper’s fee varies with the status differences between gatekeeper and client. It does this by jointly applying two theories. Network Exchange Theory (NET) models the gatekeeper–client relation (Corra 2000, 2008; Corra and Willer 2002) and Status Characteristics Theory (SCT) models the impact of status differences on that relation. (See Walker et al. 2000 for an overview of NET and Wagner and Berger 2002 for an overview of SCT.)

I build on earlier work that combines NET and SCT (Willer, Lovaglia and Markovsky 1997; Thye 2000; Thye, Willer and Markovsky 2006). The expectation factor introduced by Thye et al. (2006) is generalized and extended to the gatekeeping theory formulated by Corra and Willer (2002). Predictions are developed by applying Thye and Colleagues' expectation factor (qE) to Corra and Willer's gatekeeping equations.

## NETWORK EXCHANGE THEORY: A MODEL FOR GATEKEEPING

Exchange networks offer a well-understood context for modelling gatekeeping. Consider a G—C—V relation in which the resources a client controls (RSC) are a resource pool. The gatekeeper's fee is the amount of G-C resources that G can get C to agree to in exchange for access to V. At equipower, actors connected by a resource pool divide it into equal parts (see below). The G—C—V structure is a gatekeeping structure because C must complete its agreement with G before it can exchange with V. Said somewhat differently, in exchange networks gatekeeping takes the form of ordering, a structural power condition. [3]

Since gatekeeping structures are power structures, the gatekeeper will gain more than half the pool as follows. NET predicts that G is advantaged because C, the client, is constrained to reach agreement with G in order to gain access to valued payoffs in the second relation. The relative power of the gatekeeper is reflected in the division of the first of two ordered relations. The amount the gatekeeper negotiates above the equipower payoff (i.e., G and C splitting the resource pool) is a consequence of its greater power. I now use NET's resistance equations to show how fees are predicted.

### ***Resistance: NET's Predictive Tool***

In NET, resistance predicts exchange outcomes from the mixed motives that actors experience in exchange relations. In any mixed-motive situation, each actor seeks its best outcome, called Pmax, and seeks to avoid its worst outcome, called Pcon. When Pi is the payoff to i, Pimax is i's best payoff and Picon the payoff at confrontation (when agreement is not reached), i's resistance to exchange is given by

$$R_i = \frac{P_i \max - P_i}{P_i - P_i con} \qquad (1)$$

Linking actors' motives to each other, Principle 2 of NET asserts that agreements occur at equi-resistance (Willer 1981, 1999). That is, NET predicts that exchanges occur when $R_i = R_j$, Therefore,

$$R_i = \frac{P_i \max - P_i}{P_i - P_i con} = \frac{P_j \max - P_j}{P_j - P_j con} = R_j \qquad (2)$$

As an example, I set initial conditions for a dyad in which A and B divide a pool of 29 resources. The smallest divisible unit is 1. The most that either can gain is 28, leaving 29 - 28 = 1 for the other. Therefore, Pmax = 28. When A and B fail to reach an agreement, they are in confrontation and no exchange occurs giving Pcon = 0 for both:

$$R_A = \frac{28 - P_A}{P_A - 0} = \frac{28 - P_B}{P_B - 0} = R_B \tag{3}$$

By symmetry, $P_A = 14.5$ and $P_B = 14.5$. Since the dyad contains no conditions that produce power differences, these are the payoffs at equipower.

In the ordered G – C – V structure, the client C must complete the G – C exchange to have access to and to exchange in the C – V relation. The cost to C of not completing that first exchange is the loss of value expected in the second. Let the pool in both relations contain 29 resources. Since no power condition is present in the second relation C can reasonably expect to gain 14.5 as calculated above. That is, the cost to C of not exchanging with G, $P_C$gcon = -14.5 and giving $P_C$ = 11.72 and $P_G$ = 17.28. Therefore, the gatekeeper's fee is 17.28 – 14.5 = 2.78.

$$R_C = \frac{28 - P_C}{P_C - (-14.5)} = \frac{28 - P_G}{P_G} = R_G \tag{4}$$

More generally, the effect of ordering on the first exchange relation is to lower the value of Pcon for the client in the G – C relation by the value expected to be gained in the C – V relation ($P_C$v).

Therefore,

$$P_C\text{gcon} = - P_C\text{v} \tag{5}$$

For gatekeeping, application of NET's resistance equations predicts that, as the value of the access sought by the client increases ($P_{CV}$), so does the fee paid by the client to the gatekeeper (Corra 2000). The following are the main results of Corra and Willer's (2002) investigation of gatekeeping:

1. Gatekeeper's fees are determined by the value of the access granted to clients.
2. To gain fees, gatekeepers must monopolize control of access.
3. Multiple gatekeepers can gain fees only by organizing a shared monopoly, for example, by licensing.

The effect of status differences on gatekeeping has not been quantitatively predicted previously and it is to that issue that I turn.

STATUS CHARACTERISTICS AND GATEKEEPING

How do differences in the statuses of gatekeepers and clients affect the gatekeeper-client relationship? Two independent effects are possible. First, status differences in the gatekeeper-client relation can affect the fees clients will pay through status influence. Second, status differences in the client-valued access relation can impact fees through status-value. I show how both affect fees when there are status differences in both. In the subsection to immediately follow, I generalize and extend the expectation factor introduced by Thye et al. (2006) to the gatekeeping theory formulated by Corra and Willer (2002) to calculate and predict the effect of status on gatekeeping.

## CALCULATING THE IMPACT OF STATUS ON GATEKEEPING

SCT researchers typically study status effects in a standardized experimental paradigm where the primary independent measure is p(S) called the probability of a self or stay response. The measure is an indicator of resistance to influence, a quality I will exploit below. SCT gives predictions for p(S) based on the following equation:

$$p(S) = m + qE \quad (6)$$

where m is the baseline tendency to resist influence (i.e., to stay) when actors are status equals. The parameter is presumed to vary for different populations of actors. The parameter q captures the effects of the experimental situation (e.g., the degree to which actors are task-focused or collectively oriented). In that sense, q captures the effects of situation-specific factors that influence p(S) (resistance). As an example, q may be relatively large for interacting partners who are individually oriented and, therefore, more likely to resist influence than collectively oriented actors with the same difference in expectations, E (i.e., ep - eo). [4] I generalize procedures developed by Thye et al. (2006) to predict the effect of status on gatekeeping.

From equation 5, Thye et al. develop two equations for exchange, the first for inflation of payoffs to low status actors and the second for deflation of payoffs to high status actors. Where $P^I_L$ is the status-inflated payoff to the low status actor,

$$P^I_L = P_L(1 + qE) \quad (7)$$

And where $P^D_H$ is the status-deflated payoff to the high status actor,

$$P_H^D = \frac{P_H}{1 + qE} \quad (8)$$

Since status can affect gatekeeping in either of two ways, three different resistance equations are needed to predict its effects. I first write equations for the effect of status differences in the gatekeeper–client relation. Second are equations for the effect of status on gatekeeping when the status differences are in the client–valued access relation. Finally, equations for the impact of status on both relations are given.

When the gatekeeper has higher status than the client and status is not salient in the client-valued access relation (C-V), combine factors from equations 2, 6 and 7 to calculate resistance as follows:

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G^D}{P_G} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C^I}{P_C - (-P_{CV})} = R_C \quad (8)$$

(9)

That is to say, the resistance of the gatekeeper is qualified by status deflated payoffs from the client while the resistance of the client is qualified by status inflated payoffs from the gatekeeper while also reduced by the value of the access sought. Similarly, the equation for the low status gatekeeper and high status client when status is not salient in the client–valued object relation is

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G^I}{P_G} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C^D}{P_C - (-P_{cv})} = R_C \quad (10)$$

which is read analogously to equation 8.

When status differences are salient only in the client–valued access relation, the impact of status on the gatekeeper–client relation is exclusively through the inflation or deflation of the value of that for which the client is seeking access. Therefore, for a low status client,

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G}{P_G} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C}{P_C - (-P^I_{cv})} = R_C \quad (11)$$

And for a high status client,

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G}{P_G} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C}{P_C - (-P_{cv}^D)} = R_C \tag{12}$$

Finally, status may be salient in both relations. When it is and when the client is low status in both, combining elements from equations 9 and 11,

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G^D}{P_G^D} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C^I}{P_C^I - (-P_{CV}^I)} = R_C \tag{13}$$

When status is salient in both relations and the client is high status in both,

$$R_G = \frac{P_G \max - P_G^I}{P_G} = \frac{P_C \max - P_C^D}{P_C - (-P^D{}_{CV})} = R_C \tag{14}$$

Further equations for mixed cases, where the client is high status in one relation and low status in the other are not written here because mixed cases need not be investigated. Mixed cases need not be investigated for, if predictions calculated from equations 8 through 13 are supported, mixed cases should also be predictable.

**PREDICTIONS FOR THE EFFECTS OF STATUS ON GATEKEEPING**

Using the equations derived above, I offer predictions for the impact of status differences on the gatekeeper–client relation when those differences occur (1) in the G – C gatekeeper–client relation, (2) in the C – V client–valued access relation and (3) in both relations. The predictions are written for the following initial conditions. The gatekeeper– client relation contains 29 resources to divide. The number 29 was chosen because, as a prime, it provides little or no clue to subjects for equitable divisions. The client–valued object relation contains 30 resources. I offer no predictions for resource divisions in the C – V client–valued access relation.

To calculate point predictions for the predictions below, I first calculate values of $P_H$ and $P_L$ using Balkwell's (1991) version of Berger, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch's (1977) polynomial function to estimate path strength. I set m = 1.0 but a value for q is needed. [5] Thye et al. (2006) set q = .28, but found that they underestimated the effect of status differences in the exchange setting. Calculating back from their results gives q = .34 for the exchange setting. When D is a diffuse status characteristic not relevant to the task, the advantaged subject has path lengths 4 and 5. Plugging those values into Balkwell's program for estimating e (www.geocities.com/jwbalkwell/expect.html) gives .19267; summing and rounding, E = .19267 – (-.19267) = .385. Then qE = .385 x .34 = .13. Plugging into equations 6 and 7: $P^I_L = 1.13\ P_L$ and $P^D_H = .885\ P_H$.

$P_1$: For equal status clients and gatekeepers, the C-G resource division will be 9.89 - 19.11. The gatekeeper's fee is 4.61.

[For Status Difference in the gatekeeper – client relation]

$P_2$: For low status clients and high status gatekeepers, the C-G resource division will be 7.84 – 21.16. The gatekeeper's fee is 6.66.

$P_3$: For high status clients and low status gatekeepers, the C-G resource division will be 11.84 - 17.16. The gatekeeper's fee is 2.66.

[For Status Difference in the client – valued object relation]

$P_4$: For low status clients and high status valued objectives, the C-G resource division will be 9.16 – 19.84. The gatekeeper's fee is 5.34.

$P_5$: For high status clients and low status valued objectives, the C-G resource division will be 10.28 – 19.72. The gatekeeper's fee is 4.22.

[For Status Differences in both gatekeeper–client and client–valued object relation]

$P_6$: For low status clients and high status gatekeepers and valued objectives, the C—G resource division will be 7.43 - 21.57. The gatekeeper's fee is 7.07.

$P_7$: For high status clients and low status gatekeepers and valued objectives, the C—G resource division will be 12.19 - 16.81. The gatekeeper's fee is 2.31.

## CONCLUSION

Gatekeepers control access to 'benefits' they do not own, benefits that are valued by 'clients.' Seeking access to those benefits, clients assume obligations which may be discharged by a fee paid to the gatekeeper. Employment agents, car salesmen, real estate agents are gatekeepers because they control access to jobs, cars and housing respectively as well as information about each.[6] When clients are lower status, for example African American, employment agents may steer them to lower paid, less desirable jobs, car salesmen may ask for and receive higher prices, and real estate agents may show only segregated housing.

Previous research by Corra and Willer (2002) demonstrated that fees of gatekeepers are determined by the value of the access granted to clients. This paper extends that analysis by demonstrating that, for a given access, the gatekeeper's fee varies with the status of gatekeeper and client. A measure of the quantitative impact of status differences is developed, along with predictions drawn from that measure.

By jointly applying Network Exchange Theory (NET) and Status Characteristics Theory (SCT), predictions have been offered for:

- The effect of status differences on gatekeeping.
- How differences in the statuses of Gatekeepers and clients affect the gatekeeper-client relationship.
- How status differences in the client-valued access relation affect the gatekeeper-client relationship.
- How status differences in the client-gatekeeper and client-valued access relations affect the gatekeeper-client relationship.

More generally, predictions offered in this paper, if supported, will advance understandings of discriminatory practices in which power over low status persons is grounded jointly in structure and status. To that end formal sociological theory is extended to cover this new phenomenon. The high precision of that extension is the result of new bridges drawn between Network Exchange Theory and Status Characteristics Theory, perhaps the most extensively tested formal theories in sociology.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. More technically, the gatekeeper has not appropriated and does not alienate the exclusive right to the benefit. For a treatment of private property rights such as alienation and appropriation see Gilham (1981). Marsden's (1983) simulation study found middlemen to be as powerful as any network position (1983), but, in experiments reported by Willer (2002), middlemen had the lowest profits.

2. Thye's (2002) status value theory of power similarly asserts that the value of things held/controlled by high status actors is inflated. Studying a federal law-enforcement agency, Blau (1956), for example, found that only one agent had the expertise to deal with problems continually encountered in the job. Thus developed a system of colleague consultation in which the expert agent gained status from other agents. Here, deference given to the expert by agents indicates that the expert, as gatekeeper, has the higher status. Following Thye, that higher status in turn inflates the value of the expert's information.

3. In gatekeeping, exchanges are ordered, but not all ordered relations involve gatekeeping. For example, when the middleman B buys a commodity from A and sells to C, B is not a gatekeeper because, before the sale to C, B owns the commodity.
1

4. Equation 6 implies that p(S) = m for status equals, partners for whom ep - eo = 0. Variations in q affect the magnitude of the difference between p(S) and m for any expectation advantage, E.

5. Berger et al. treat m as a characteristic of subject populations and estimate it separately for each experiment. Using NET I treat m as a subject-specific measure of resistance. NET implies that resistance is equal to 1 at the point of exchange and I set m = 1 for the equations below.

6. The key to car salesmen and real estate agents' classification as gatekeepers is that they control access to information, the disclosure (or withholding) of which is a benefit in and of itself. As gatekeepers, realtors can extract fees from buyers or sellers. The gatekeeping role as such is further complicated because realtors are privy to information about both parties. Many states have recognized the relative power of realtors to control and influence transactions by enacting statutes that require realtors to declare to all parties to potential transactions whether they are acting on behalf of sellers or buyers.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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