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STATUS CHARACTERISTICS AND SELF-CATEGORIZATION: A BRIDGE ACROSS THEORETICAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

We present an integration that bridges two longstanding theoretical traditions: status characteristics theory, developed primarily by sociologists, and self-categorization theory which is rooted in British social psychology. Status characteristics theory explains how culturally valued social characteristics lead to interaction advantages and disadvantages in task groups. Self-categorization theory addresses a range of problems including how in-group/out-group distinctions affect interactions and self-perceptions. Our integrated theory offers a rigorous explanation of how inequalities in power, prestige and influence are determined by three factors: group membership, observable status characteristics, and interaction patterns within the group.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have long been interested in the ways people influence each other in groups assembled to perform tasks and solve problems. These settings range from policy-making committees in political parties to collections of strangers responding to emergencies. Frequently in these contexts, ambiguities arise during the course of reaching shared solutions that lead people to look to one another for guidance. Absent known capabilities, individuals tend to form inferences about one another based on interpersonal and situational cues. Previous research has found that interaction style, social characteristics and group memberships serve as important cues for expectations about task performance and influence.

Two research traditions have made significant progress in understanding social influences in task settings. *Expectation states theory* holds that individual interaction styles and personal traits evoke expectations regarding task performance. *Self-categorization theory* posits that a cognitive

categorization process affects how others are regarded and treated within the setting. The *status characteristics theory* branch of the expectation states program proposes that individual traits such as race, gender and education evoke expectations regarding task performance. To date these two theories have operated in virtual isolation from each other. The resulting knowledge gap has left important questions unanswered, including this central question: How do status processes and categorization processes impact one another? The answer has important implications, both for group members and for the group as a whole.

Below we offer a theory that describes how group membership, interaction patterns and status affect influence in task group settings. We begin with a review of the relevant literatures, followed by a detailed statement of the theory. We conclude with a concise summary and a brief description of approaches that may be used to test the integrated theory.

STATUS CHARACTERISTICS THEORY

The status characteristics branch of expectation states theory explains how socially valued traits organize interaction in group task settings (Berger, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch 1977). A *status characteristic* (SC) is defined as a property of a person that has two or more differentially valued states, each having associated with it one or more similarly evaluated expectations for behavior. In contemporary American culture, *diffuse status characteristics* such as race, gender, and education have many associated expectations for behavior. In contrast, *specific status characteristics,* such as mathematical skill and legal training, are effective within more circumscribed settings.

The theory asserts that those who possess higher states of SCs are expected to be more competent than those possessing lower states. Over the course of social interactions, these performance expectations result in differentiated power, prestige and influence structures among task group members (Berger, Cohen and Zelditch 1972; Berger et al. 1977; Berger, Norman and Balkwell 1992; Webster and Foschi 1988). Relative to those with lower status, higher status members rise higher in the group's *observable power and prestige order* (OPPO). Operationally, this means that higher status members *(i)* receive more opportunities to make suggestions, *(ii)* offer more suggestions, *(iii)* have more positively evaluated suggestions, and *(iv)* have more influence over other members.

The theory's scope conditions limit its application to situations where interactants believe the task has a correct solution, and that it is necessary and legitimate to consider others' suggestions. Several explicit propositions form the core of the theory (Wagner and Berger 2007): (1) A SC becomes salient if it differentiates members of a task setting or if it is perceived to be relevant to the task. (2) If a SC is salient and not disassociated from the task, then actors forms expectations consistent with states of the SC. (3) If new actors enter the situation, status information relating to the new actor is combined with prior information. (4) Information on multiple like-valued SCs is weighted by their relevance to the task, combined in positive and negative subsets, then summed to determine expectation (dis)advantages. (5) Expectation (dis)advantages determine perceived competence, which establishes members' positions in the group's OPPO. Key propositions have been mathematized, allowing precise hypotheses to be derived and tested.

SELF-CATEGORIZATION THEORY

An off-shoot of social identity theory, self-categorization theory emphasizes the cognitive underpinnings of social categorization by articulating how this process generates certain intra-group behaviors that affect perceptions of self and others (Turner 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell 1987). The key idea is that when group contexts are salient, individuals act more in accord with their shared group identity and less with their personal identities (Turner 1991:155). This process of *depersonalization,* generates a perception of interchangeability among group members in terms of prototypical or unique features of the group (Turner 1985). When categorization occurs, group members thus see themselves as interchangeable in terms of the ideal-typical features of the group, and perceive out-group members as interchangeable with each other rather than as unique individuals.

A motive for *cognitive uncertainty reduction* underscores this depersonalization process--an idea borrowed from social comparison theory (Hogg and Mullin 1999; see also Festinger 1954; Moscovici 1976, 1981; Suls and Miller 1977; Suls and Wills 1991). However, in contrast to traditional views on uncertainty reduction, self-categorization theory argues that shared group membership is a precondition for influence. People establish confidence in their beliefs and opinions by comparing them to those held by other in-group members. Perceived in-group consensus generates confidence and the belief that one's own perceptions are reliable and valid. In contrast, disagreement with other in-group members engenders cognitive uncertainty and the realization that one's own perceptions may be unreliable (David and Turner 2001). If it conflicts with the ideal-typical opinion of the group, then in-group members are likely to doubt their initial opinion in favor of one more consistent with that of their group, opening them up to influence from within. As individual depersonalization is paramount to the perception of one's own group membership, in-group members are more likely to defer to those within their group than those outside. The impact is two-fold. First, initial distinctions between groups are reinforced because in-group members tend to follow the lead of other in-group members. Second, those expressing opinions that are the most consistent with, or *prototypical* of, the group's ideals become the most influential over their in-group.

INTEGRATING THE THEORIES

Both of the above theories address who influences whom when disagreements arise. Self-categorization theory posits that interactants use information on group membership to favor in-group members. Status characteristics theory posits that group members use status characteristics to make ability inferences that determine who influences others' opinions. Less clear, however, is what happens within and between groups that are differentiated by both group membership *and* status characteristics. The "evaluation-expectations" branch of expectations states theory introduced a concept that provides a useful connection between the two traditions (Balkwell 1991; Fisek, Berger and Norman 1991; Skvoretz and Fararo 1996).

Behavioral Interaction Pattern

A *behavioral interaction pattern* (BIP) is a set of interaction cycles with consistent orderings insofar as who gives, and who receives, positive and negative evaluations. BIPs explain how interaction cycles in newly-formed task groups produce advantages and disadvantages among members (Fişek et al.1991:116). Task-oriented behavior is classified into four categories: chances to contribute a suggestion, actual suggestions, positive reactions and negative reactions. As interaction transpires, these behaviors serve as components for BIP cycles of opportunities, actions and evaluations (Fişek et al. 1991:116).

Fişek et al. (1991:117) argued that established BIPs sort behaviors into high and low *status typification states.* These can be understood via relatively concrete dimensions such as "leader-follower," "initiator-reactor," and "aggressive-shy." They become relevant to high or low task ability states, and thus to success or failure at the group task. In short, BIPs link behavioral cues to task outcomes, ordering group status and influence patterns along the way.

By definition, "group membership" is not a status characteristic, nor is it necessarily relevant to performance expectations. We argue that group membership acts as a heuristic to reduce uncertainty and, as such, can have effects similar to those of status characteristics. Task settings induce beliefs about in-group members because, when faced with uncertainty, people accept suggestions from in-group members whose opinions they view as interchangeable with their own. Below we complete the theoretical bridge by integrating the aforementioned aspects of self-categorization theory with the propositions of status characteristics theory.

Theoretical Integration

Scope Conditions. Provisionally, the theory applies in settings where actors perceive that (1) there is an evaluated, collective task, (2) information exists on subgroup membership (in-group vs. out-group) and/or status characteristics for each other actor, and (3) there are no preexisting relationships between actors.

Propositions. The theory is expressed through logically connected propositions that explain how group membership affects influence patterns. As noted earlier, when group tasks are characterized by uncertainty, in-group vs. out-group membership becomes salient and thus available for use as a behavioral cue to reduce uncertainty (Hogg and Mullin 1999; Mullin and Hogg 1998, 1999; Grieve and Hogg 1999; Hogg and Grieve 1999).

Proposition 1: If members of a task setting are differentiated by group membership, then group membership will be salient and used as a cue.

Self-categorization theory claims that people reduce uncertainty and establish confidence in their beliefs and opinions by comparing them to other in-group members' beliefs and opinions, and favoring them above out-group members. We suggest that this preference helps to order performance evaluations through BIPs, the same as with status organizing processes. Webster and Hysom (1998) argued that BIPs can be triggered by many factors including valued personal

characteristics such as friendliness or trustworthiness. Self-categorization theory and traditional accounts of social identity theory each offer clear evidence that membership in the in-group versus the out-group affects inferences about such qualities. This leads to our next proposition.

Proposition 2: If group membership is salient and not explicitly dissociated from the task, then a BIP becomes salient.

By definition, the salient BIP leads actors to favor their in-group when soliciting or evaluating performance outputs. As noted, the established BIPs sort behaviors into high and low status types, such as leader and follower, and these become relevant to high or low task ability states. Consequently, bias toward positive in-group evaluations leads to the formation of status typification states consistent with group membership.

Proposition 3: If a BIP is salient, then actors form high status typification states for in-group members and low status typification states for out-group members.

The integrated theory implies that interaction patterns shift when group membership is salient--the case when an in-group and an out-group exist. If one prefers to solicit task input from one's in-group, then *de facto* subgroups should form based on interaction frequency. Within subgroups, those who display behavior that is most prototypical of the group's ideals will be looked to by others when they are uncertain of an opinion. Self-categorization theory assumes that the goal of any in-group member is to be consistent with the group and to successfully depersonalize others. By aligning most closely with group ideals, prototypical group members represent the pinnacle of the depersonalization process.

Participants often enter group settings with knowledge of the group's prototypical features. Otherwise, such information is likely to be revealed very soon after joining. The actual extent of each participant's prototypicality is then disclosed in one or more ways. These include (1) *prior knowledge,* i.e., participants enter the interaction setting already aware of who has prototypical qualities and who does not; (2) *self-disclosure*, whereby the participants intentionally or unintentionally indicate whether they possesses prototypical qualities; or (3) *authoritative designation*, whereby a trusted authority figure determines who among participants is and is not prototypical and communicates this to all involved. For purposes of testing the theory, these different routes to the disclosure of prototypical qualities permit a wide range of operationalizations spanning both natural and experimental settings.

In newly formed task settings comprised of subgroups, equal status members of the same subgroup have equivalent opportunities to impact each other. Nevertheless, we predict that influence hierarchies will quickly emerge within subgroups. Fişek et al. (1991) advance an explanation for such hierarchies in homogenous groups. As noted, they argue that BIPs become salient when they provide new information in the setting. Within a subgroup, group membership is not salient because subgroup members are interacting, and so a BIP becomes the chief basis of discrimination between members. As interaction within newly-formed clusters proceeds, BIP cycles emerge and settle into stable patterns. The group structure crystallizes when a burden-of-proof process connects BIPs to similarly evaluated task outcomes. Skvoretz and Fararo's (1996)

E-state structuralism theory broadened this idea, merging status characteristics theory with social network analysis. In their theory, network ties are comprised of "precedence" relations, i.e., dominance-deference between connected actors. In a tie between actors *x* and *y*, either *y* defers to *x* (*xPy*), *x* defers to *y* (*yPx*), or neither (*xNy*).

These ideas are applicable to settings in which bystanders observe, and are influenced by, interactions between other in-group members. We are especially interested in how *prototypical behaviors* revealed in interactions between *x* and *y* impact a bystander *z.* Prototypical behaviors reflect group attributes that distinguish the group from others. For instance, a member of an extremist political group acts prototypically when urging fellow members to intensify their activism in the public sphere in accord with group ideals. Following self-categorization theory's uncertainty reduction argument, we posit that the likelihood of *xPy* increases as *x* displays prototypical behaviors in the BIP between *x* and *y.*

Proposition 4: The more prototypical the actor, the higher the status typification state.

The next proposition uses status characteristics theory's concept of *abstract task ability,* i.e., whether or not a person generally is presumed to be capable in task settings (Berger et al. 1977). For our purposes, in-group members' performance outputs are more apt to produce positive evaluations than are the suggestions made by out-group members.

Proposition 5: If an actor forms status typification states, then the actor forms abstract task ability expectations that are consistent with those states.

The theoretical bridge is completed by two propositions from status characteristics theory:

Combining Assumption: If an actor has formed ability expectations, then s/he uses them to infer task competence for actors in the setting.

Basic Expectation Assumption: The greater an actor's perceived competence, the higher his/her position in the group's OPPO.

As a simplifying assumption, and with no evidence as yet to suggest the contrary, we also stipulate that the relative effects of subgroup membership and status characteristics on interaction are equal.

Derivations

Our integration of the status characteristics and self-categorization theories generates several logical derivations. These predict how the group's observable power and prestige order (OPPO) will be affected by status characteristics and prototypicality. When the OPPO is operationalized, these derivations become hypotheses that can be tested in empirical settings. An interesting consequence of the integrated theory is that, despite their different social foundations, prototypicality and status are predicted to have the same kinds of effects on the group's power and prestige structure:

Derivation 1: Higher status actors rise higher in the OPPO than lower status actors.

Derivation 2: Prototypical actors rise higher in the OPPO than non-prototypical actors.

Further, prototypicality requires there to be two or more distinct groups for comparison purposes. This generates in-group *vs.* out-group identities and, consequently, behaviors that are more frequently directed within subgroups than between them. If interaction is systematically clustered within subgroups consisting of members who are similar in terms of prototypicality, then BIPs would be expected to arise within subgroups and to generate distinct and stable OPPO hierarchies. This leads to the following:

Derivation 3: Separate OPPO hierarchies form in each subgroup of the larger group.

Skvoretz and Fararo's (1996) theory lets us predict a bystander's precedence relative to members of an observed pair of interacting in-group members. Via the mechanisms they describe, *x* will have precedence over *z,* and *z* precedence over *y* (i.e., *xPz* and *zPy*) to the extent that *z* observes *xPy.* In turn, z defers to *x* because *z* observed *x* directing favorably evaluated suggestions to y. This causes *z* to regard *x* as someone to whom both she and *y* ought to defer. Further, *z* regards *y*--who has deferred to *x*--as one who could be influenced, and so *z* acts accordingly in interactions with *y.* Fişek et al. (1991) show how in the long run such pair-wise precedence relationships produce these types of transitive social influence hierarchies among group members.

Derivation 4: All else being equal, prototypical actors rise higher in the OPPO within subgroups than non-prototypical actors.

CONCLUSIONS

Status characteristics theory and self-categorization theory take different explanatory routes to account for influence patterns in task groups. In both theories, disagreements with other group members trigger a process that leads to differential influence among members, potentially disfavoring those with relevant knowledge and elevating those without. Self-categorization theory posits in-group favoritism as the engine, whereas status characteristics theory considers the effects of performance expectations associated with high and low states of socially valued traits. Integrating elements of both theories opens an array of potential new applications without subverting either theory's basic tenets.

The integrated theory outlined above suggests that uncertainty in task settings elicits behavioral interchange patterns. These BIPs link behavioral cues to task outcomes and order social influence patterns among group members. The theory allows for an array of new derivations, including the predictions that interaction clusters will emerge along arbitrary group boundaries, and that the prototypicality of an actor will intensify the effect of group membership such that his or her influence over others may approach or even exceed that of high status actors.

Key implications of the theory are amenable to empirical testing in an open interaction laboratory setting. Varying the size of discussion groups within the experimental design can be used to assess key implications of the theory including: *(i)* whether dual status hierarchies emerge when a dichotomous group membership is salient, and *(ii)* whether an in-group member's influence over others increases if they display behavior that is highly prototypical of the in-group.

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